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Allegiances (Revised)

Updated the allegiance for this book because it was bothering me

Thunderclan

Leader Oakstar: Dark reddish-brown she-cat with amber eyes and a silver muzzle

Deputy Redtail: Dark tortoiseshell she-cat with a dark ginger tail and amber eyes

Apprentice, Fernpaw

Medicine Cat Spottedleaf: Dark tortoiseshell and white tom with amber eyes

Warriors (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Frostfur: Pure snow-white tom with dark sky-blue eyes

Apprentice, Silverpaw

Goldenflower: Pale ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Patchpaw

Tigerclaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Brindleface: Pale gray tabby tom with darker flecks and green eyes

Apprentice, Firepaw

Darkstripe: Dark gray tabby she-cat with black stripes and yellow eyes

Longtail: Pale brown tabby she-cat with black stripes and yellow-green eyes

Dappletail: Dappled tortoiseshell and white tom with white patches and amber eyes

Willowpelt: Very pale silver-gray tom with unusual blue eyes

Mousefur: Dusky brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Fernpaw: Pale gray tom with darker flecks and pale leaf-green eyes

Silverpaw: Silver-and-black tabby tom with blue eyes

Patchpaw: Black-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

Firepaw: Bright flame-colored tabby she-cat with emerald-green eyes

Queens (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Lionheart: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes (Mother of Sorrelkit, a dappled tortoiseshell and white tom with amber eyes, Cloudkit, a snowy-white she-cat with blue eyes, Cinderkit, a dark smoky-gray tom with pale blue eyes, and Blossomkit, a tortoiseshell and white tom with petal-shaped white patches and green eyes)

Whitestorm: White she-cat with yellow eyes (Mother of Ashkit, a pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and dark blue eyes, Elderkit, a dark gray she-cat with amber eyes, Dustkit, a dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, and Tulipkit, a pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and green eyes)

Patchpelt: Black and white she-cat with amber eyes

Smallear: Gray she-cat with amber eyes

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

One-Eye: Pale gray tom with one yellow eye

Speckletail: Pale golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Halftail: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and a stumpy tail

Runningwind: Light brown taby she-cat with green eyes

Rosetail: Gray tabby tom with a reddish tail and amber eyes

Shadowclan

Leader **Brokenstar:** Dark brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Deputy **Blackfoot:** White she-cat with black paws, black-rimmed ears, and amber eyes

Medicine Cat **Runningnose:** Gray and white she-cat with rheumy amber eyes

Warriors

Stumpytail: Brown she-cat with darker stripes, green eyes, and a stumpy tail

Apprentice, Brownpaw

Pebble: Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Wetpaw

Rowanberry: Cream and brown tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Littlepaw

Nightpelt: Black she-cat with bright yellow-green eyes

Mousewing: Black she-cat with pale blue eyes

Apprentices

Brownpaw: Brown she-cat with orange eyes

Wetpaw: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Littlepaw: Brown tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes

Queens

Finchflight: Black and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Brackenfoot: Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger legs and orange eyes

Elders

Ashfur: Gray she-cat with green eyes

Windclan

Leader **Tallstar:** Black and white she-cat with amber eyes

Riverclan

Leader **Willowstar:** Pale silver-gray tabby tom with amber eyes and a broken jaw

Deputy **Bluefur:** Blue-gray tom with blue eyes

Warriors

Blackclaw: Smoky-black she-cat with orange eyes

Graypool: Dark gray tom with yellow eyes

Stonefur: Pale blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Raggedpelt: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Dottie: Black and white she-cat with amber eyes

Raven: Black she-cat with a white chest and tail and green eyes

Sandy: Pale ginger tom with darker stripes and pale leaf-green eyes

Henrietta: Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Starclan

Mosskit: Pale gray and white tom with bright blue eyes

Swampkit: White tom with yellow eyes

Announcement!

ATTENTION ALL ARTISTS OF WATTPAD!!!

I need a cover artist to make the cover for this story.

I am willing to pay $30 to whoever can make the cover

You don't have to be good or bad, you just have to be committed to the project!

If you are interested, please private message me and I'll give you the details.

There is no deadline so you can take as much time as you need

I use Venmo and Zelle as payment, if you use another app, just let me know and I'll download it.

Thanks for reading this short announcement!

Position: Closed

Prologue

A half-moon glowed on smooth granite boulders, turning them silver. The silence was broken only by the ripple of water from the swift black river and the whisper of trees in the forest beyond.

There was a stirring in the shadows, and from all around lithe dark shapes crept stealthily over the rocks. Unsheathed claws glinted in the moonlight. Wary eyes flashed like amber. And then, as if on a silent signal, the creatures leaped at each other, and suddenly the rocks were alive with wrestling, screeching cats.

At the center of the frenzy of fur and claws, a massive pale tabby pinned a blue-colored tom to the ground and drew up his head triumphantly. "Bluefur!" the tabby growled. "How dare you hunt in our territory? The Sunningrocks belong to Thunderclan!"

"After tonight, Goldenflower, this will be just another Riverclan hunting ground!" the blue-colored tom spat back.

A warning yowl came from the shore, shrill and anxious. "Look out! More Riverclan warriors are coming!"

Goldenflower turned to see sleek wet bodies sliding out of the water below the rocks. The drenched Riverclan warriors bounded silently up the shore and hurled themselves into battle without even stopping to shake the water from their fur.

The pale tabby glared down at Bluefur. "You may swim like otters, but you and your warriors do not belong in this forest!" He drew back his lips and showed his teeth as the cat struggled beneath him.

The desperate scream of a Thunderclan tom rose above the clamor. A wiry Riverclan she-cat had pinned the brown warrior flat on his belly. Now she lunged toward his neck with jaws still dripping from her swim across the river.

Goldenflower heard the cry and let go of Bluefur. With a mighty leap, he knocked the enemy warrior away from the tom. "Quick, Mousefur, run!" he ordered, before turning on the Riverclan she-cat who had threatened him. Mousefur scrambled to his paws, wincing from a deep gash on his shoulder, and raced away.

Behind him, Goldenflower spat with rage as the Riverclan she-cat sliced open his nose. Blood blinded him for an instant, but he lunged forward regardless and sank his teeth into the hind leg of his enemy. The Riverclan cat squealed and struggled free.

"Goldenflower!" The yowl came from a warrior with a tail as red as fox fur. "This is useless! There are too many Riverclan warriors!"

"No, Redtail. Thunderclan will never be beaten!" Goldenflower yowled back, leaping to Redtail's side. "This is our territory!" Blood was welling around his broad pale ginger muzzle, and he shook his head impatiently, scattering scarlet drops onto the rocks.

"Thunderclan will honor your courage, Goldenflower, but we cannot afford to lose any more of our warriors," Redtail urged. "Oakstar would never expect her warriors to fight against these impossible odds. We will have another chance to avenge this defeat." She met Goldenflower's yellow-eyed gaze steadily, then reared away and sprang onto a boulder at the edge of the trees.

"Retreat, Thunderclan! Retreat!" she yowled. At once her warriors squirmed and struggled away from their opponents. Spitting and snarling, they backed toward Redtail. For a heartbeat, the Riverclan cats looked confused. Was this battle so easily won? Then Bluefur yowled a jubilant cry. As soon as they heard him, the Riverclan warriors raised their voices and joined their deputy in caterwauling their victory.

Redtail look down at her warriors. With a flick of her tail, she gave the signal and the Thunderclan cats dived down the far side of the Sunningrocks, then disappeared into the trees.

Goldenflower followed last. He hesitated at the edge of the forest and glanced back at the bloodstained battlefield. His face was grim, his eyes furious slits. Then he leaped after his Clan into the silent

forest.

In a deserted clearing, an old reddish-brown she-cat sat alone, staring up at the clear night sky. All around her in the shadows, she could hear the breathing and stirrings of sleeping cats.

A small tortoiseshell tom emerged from a dark corner, his pawsteps quick and soundless.

The reddish-brown cat dipped her head in greeting. "How is Mousefur?" she meowed.

"His wounds are deep, Oakstar," answered the tortoiseshell, settling himself on the night-cool grass. "But he is young and strong; he will heal quickly."

"And the others?"

"They will all recover, too"

Oakstar sighed. "We are lucky not to have lost any of our warriors this time. You are a gifted medicine cat, Spottedleaf." She tilted her head again and studied the stars. "I am deeply troubled by tonight's defeat. Thunderclan has not been beaten in it's own territory since I became leader," she murmured. "These are difficult times for our Clan. The season of newleaf is late, and there have been fewer kits. Thunderclan needs more warriors if it is to survive."

"But the year is only just beginning," Spottedleaf pointed out calmly. "There will be more kits when greenleaf comes."

The reddish-brown cat twitched her broad shoulders. "Perhaps. But training our young to become warriors takes time. If Thunderclan is to defend its territory, it must have new warriors as soon as possible."

"Are you asking Starclan for answers?" meowed Spottedleaf gently, following Oakstar's gaze and staring up at the swath of stars glittering in the dark sky.

"It is at times like this we need the words of ancient warriors to help us. Has Starclan spoken to you?" Oakstar asked.

"Not for some moons, Oakstar."

Suddenly a shooting star blazed over the treetops. Spottedleaf's tail twitched and the fur along his spine bristled.

Oakstar's ears pricked but she remained silent as Spottedleaf continued to gaze upward.

After a few moments, Spottedleaf lowered his head and turned to Oakstar. "It was a message from Starclan," he murmured. A distant look came into his eyes. "Only a sand storm can save our Clan."

"A sand storm?" Oakstar echoed. "But we don't even have sand in the forest! How can a storm of it save us?"

Spottedleaf shook his head. "I do not know," he admitted. "But this is the message Starclan has chosen to share with me."

The Thunderclan leader fixed her clear amber eyes on the medicine cat. "You have never been wrong before, Spottedleaf," she meowed. "If Starclan has spoken, then it must be so. Only a sand storm will save our Clan."

Chapter 1

It was very dark. Sandy could sense something was near. The young tomcat's eyes opened wide as he scanned the dense undergrowth. This place was unfamiliar, but the strange scents drew him onward, deeper into the shadows. His stomach growled, reminding him of his hunger. He opened his jaws slightly to let the warm smells of the forest reach the scent glands on the roof of his mouth. Musty odors of leaf mold mingled with the tempting aroma of a small furry creature.

Suddenly a flash of gray raced past him. Sandy stopped still, listening. It was hiding in the leaves less than two tail-lengths away. Sandy knew it was a mouse - he could feel the rapid pulsing of a tiny heart deep within his ear fur. He swallowed, stifling his rumbling stomach. Soon his hunger would be satisfied.

Slowly, he lowered his body into position, crouching for the attack. He was downwind of the mouse. He knew it was not aware of him. With one final check on his prey's position, Sandy pushed back hard on his haunches and sprang, kicking up leaves on the forest floor as he rose.

The mouse dived for cover, heading toward a hole in the ground. But Sandy was already on top of it. He scooped it into the air, hooking the helpless creature with his thorn-sharp claws, flinging it up in a high arc onto the leaf-covered ground. The mouse landed dazed, but alive. It tried to run, but Sandy snatched it up again. He tossed the mouse once more, this time a little farther away. The mouse managed to scramble a few paces before Sandy caught up with it.

Suddenly a noise roared nearby. Sandy looked around, and as he did so, the mouse was able to pull away from his claws. When Sandy turned back he saw it dart into the darkness among the tangled roots of a tree.

Angry, Sandy gave up the hunt. He spun around, his green eyes

glaring, intent on searching out the noise that had cost him his kill. The sound rattled on, becoming more familiar. Sandy blinked open his eyes.

The forest had disappeared. He was inside a hot and airless kitchen, curled in his bed. Moonlight filtered through the window, casting shadows on the smooth, hard floor. The noise had been the rattle of hard, dried pellets of food as they were tipped into his dish. Sandy had been dreaming.

Lifting his head, he rested his chin on the side of his bed. His collar rubbed uncomfortably around his neck. In his dream he had felt fresh air ruffling the soft fur where the collar usually pinched. Sandy rolled onto his back, savoring the dream for a few more moments. He could still smell mouse. It was the third time since full moon that he'd had the dream, and every time the mouse had escaped his grasp.

He licked his lips. From his bed he could smell the bland odor of his food. His owners always refilled his dish before they went to bed. The dusty smell chased away the warm scents of his dream. But the hunger rumbled on in his stomach, so Sandy stretched the sleep out of his limbs and padded across the kitchen floor to his dinner. The food felt dry and tasteless on his tongue. Sandy reluctantly swallowed one more mouthful. Then he turned away from the food dish and pushed his way out through the cat flap, hoping that the smell of the garden would bring back the feeling from his dream.

Outside, the moon was bright. It was raining lightly. Sandy stalked down the tidy garden, following the starlit gravel path, feeling the stones cold and sharp beneath his paws. He made his dirt beneath a large bush with glossy green leaves and heavy purple flowers. Their sickly sweet scent cloyed the damp air around him, and he curled his lip to drive the smell out of his nostrils.

Afterward, Sandy settled down on top of one of the posts in the fence that marked the limits of his garden. It was a favorite spot of his, as he could see right into the neighboring gardens as well as into the dense green forest on the other side of the garden fence.

The rain had stopped. Behind him, the close-cropped lawn was

bathed in moonlight, but beyond his fence the woods were full of shadows. Sandy stretched his head forward to take a sniff of the damp air. His skin was warm and dry under his thick coat, but he could feel the weight of the raindrops that sparkled on his pale ginger fur.

He heard his owners giving him one last call from the back door. If he went to them now, they would greet him with gentle words and caresses and welcome him onto their bed, where he would curl, purring, warm in the crook of a bent knee.

But this time Sandy ignored his owners' voices and turned his gaze back to the forest. The crisp smell of the woods had grown fresher after the rain.

Suddenly the fur on his spine prickled. Was something moving out there? Was something watching him? Sandy stared ahead, but it was impossible to see or smell anything in the dark, tree-scented air. He lifted his chin boldly, stood up, and stretched, one paw gripping each corner of the fencepost as he straightened his legs and arched his back. He closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of the woods once more. It seemed to promise him something, tempting him onward into the whispering shadows. Tensing his muscles, he crouched for a moment. Then he leaped lightly down into the rough grass on the other side of the garden fence. As he landed, the bell on his collar rang out through the still night air.

"Where are you off to, Sandy?" meowed a familiar voice behind him.

Sandy looked up. A young black-and-white cat was balancing ungracefully on the fence.

"Hello, Dottie," Sandy replied.

"You're not going to go into the woods, are you?" Dottie's amber eyes were huge.

"Just for a look," Sandy promised, shifting uncomfortably.

"You wouldn't get me in there. It's dangerous!" Dottie wrinkled her

black nose with distaste. "Henrietta said she went into the woods once." The cat lifted her head and gestured with her nose over the rows of fences toward the garden where Henrietta lived.

"That fat old tabby never went into the woods!" Sandy scoffed. "She's hardly been beyond her own garden since her trip to the vet. All she wants to do is eat and sleep."

"No, really. She caught a robin there!" Dottie insisted.

"Well, if she did, then it was before the vet. Now she *complains* about birds because they disturb her dozing."

"Well, anyway," Dottie went on, ignoring the scorn in Sandy's mew, "Henrietta told me there are all sorts of dangerous animals out there. Huge wildcats who eat live rabbits for breakfast and sharpen their claws on old bones!"

"I'm only going for a look around," Sandy meowed. "I won't stay long."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you!" purred Dottie. The black-and-white cat turned and plunged off the fence back down into her own garden.

Sandy sat down in the coarse grass beyond the garden fence. He gave his shoulder a nervous lick and wondered how much of Dottie's gossip was true.

Suddenly the movement of a tiny creature caught his eye. He watched it scuttle under some brambles.

Instinct made him drop into a low crouch. With one slow paw after another he drew his body forward through the undergrowth. Ears pricked, nostrils flared, eyes unblinking, he moved toward the animal. He could see it clearly now, sitting up among the barbed branches, nibbling on a large seed held between its paws. It was a mouse.

Sandy rocked his haunches from side to side, preparing to leap. He held his breath in case his bell rang again. Excitement coursed through him, making his heart pound. This was even better than his

dreams! Then a sudden noise of cracking twigs and crunching leaves made him jump. His bell jangled treacherously, and the mouse darted away into the thickest tangle of the bramble bush.

Sandy stood very still and looked around. He could see the white tip of a red busy tail trailing through a clump of tall ferns up ahead. He smelled a strong, strange scent, definitely a meat-eater, but neither cat nor dog. Distracted, Sandy forgot about the mouse and watched the red tail curiously. He wanted a better look.

All of Sandy's senses strained ahead as he prowled forward. Then he detected another noise. It came from behind, but sounded muted and distant. He swiveled his ears backward to hear it better. *Pawsteps?* He wondered, but he kept his eyes fixed on the strange red fur up ahead, and continued to creep onward. It was only when the faint rustling behind him became a loud and fast-approaching leaf-crackle that Sandy realized he was in danger.

The creature hit him like an explosion and Sandy was thrown sideways into a clump of nettles. Twisting and yowling, he tried to throw off the attacker that had fastened itself to his back. It was gripping him with incredibly sharp claws. Sandy could feel spiked teeth pricking at his neck. He writhed and squirmed from whisker to tail, but he couldn't free himself. For a second he felt helpless; then he froze. Thinking fast, he flipped over onto his back. He knew instinctively how dangerous it was to expose his soft belly, but it was his only chance.

He was lucky - the ploy seemed to work. He heard a "hhuuffff" beneath him as the breath was knocked out of his attacker. Thrashing fiercely, Sandy managed to wriggle free. Without looking back, he sprinted toward his home.

Behind him, a rush of pawsteps told Sandy his attacker was giving chase. Even though the pain from his scratches stung beneath his fur, Sandy decided he would rather turn and fight than let himself be jumped on again.

He skidded to a stop, spun around, and faced his pursuer.

It was another kitten, with a thick coat of shaggy silver-and-black

tabby fur, strong legs, and a broad face. In a heartbeat, Sandy smelled that it was a tom, and sensed the power in the sturdy shoulders underneath the soft coat. Then the kitten crashed into Sandy at full pelt. Taken by surprise by Sandy's turnabout, it fell back into a dazed heap.

The impact knocked the breath out of Sandy, and he staggered. He quickly found his footing and arched his back, puffing out his sandy fur, ready to spring onto the other kitten. But his attacker simply sat up and began to lick a forepaw, all signs of aggression gone.

Sandy felt strangely disappointed. Every part of him was tense, ready for battle.

"Hi there, kittypet!" meowed the silver tabby tom cheerily. "You put up quite a fight for a tame kitty!"

Sandy remained on tiptoe for a second, wondering whether to attack anyway. Then he remembered the strength he had felt in this kitten's paws when he had pinned him to the ground. He dropped onto his pads, loosened his muscles, and let his spine unbend. "And I'll fight you again if I have to," he growled.

"I'm Silverpaw, by the way," the silver tabby kitten went on, ignoring Sandy's threat. "I'm training to be a Thunderclan warrior."

Sandy remained silent. He didn't understand what this Silverwhatsit was meowing about, but he sensed the threat had passed. He hid his confusion by leaning down to lick his ruffled chest.

"What's a kittypet like you doing out in the woods? Don't you know it's dangerous?" asked Silverpaw.

"If *you're* the most dangerous thing the woods has to offer, then I think I can handle it," Sandy bluffed.

Silverpaw looked up at him for a moment, narrowing his big blue eyes. "Oh, I'm far from the most dangerous. If I were even half a warrior, I'd have given an intruder like you some real wounds to think about."

Sandy felt a thrill of fear at these ominous words. What did this cat

mean by "intruder"?

"Anyway," meowed Silverpaw, using his sharp teeth to tug a clump of grass from between his claws, "I didn't think it was worth hurting you. You're obviously not from one of the other Clans."

"Other Clans?" Sandy echoed, confused.

Silverpaw let out an impatient hiss. "You must have heard of the four warrior Clans that hunt around here! I belong to Thunderclan. The other Clans are always trying to steal prey from our territory, especially Shadowclan. *They're* so fierce they would have ripped you to shreds, no questions asked."

Silverpaw paused to spit angrily and continued: "They come to take prey that is rightfully ours. It's the job of the Thunderclan warriors to keep them out of our territory. When I've finished my training, I'll be so dangerous, I'll have the other Clans shaking in their flea-bitten skins. They won't dare come near us then!"

Sandy narrowed his eyes. This must be one of the wildcats Dottie had warned him about! Living rough in the woods, hunting and fighting each other for every last scrap of food. Yet Sandy didn't feel scared. In fact, it was hard not to admire this confident kitten. "So you're not a warrior yet?" he asked.

"Why? Did you think I was?" Silverpaw purred proudly; then he shook his wide, furry head. "I won't be a real warrior for ages. I have to go through the training first. Kits have to be six moons old before they even *begin* training. Tonight is my first night out as an apprentice."

"Why don't you find yourself an owner with a nice cozy house instead? Your life would be much easier," Sandy meowed. "There are plenty of housefolk who'd take in a kitten like you. All you have to do is sit where they can see you and look hungry for a couple of days-"

"And they'd feed me pellets that look like rabbit droppings and soft slop!" Silverpaw interrupted. "No way! I can't think of anything worse than being a *kittypet*! They're nothing but Twoleg toys! Eating

stuff that doesn't look like food, making dirt in a box of gravel, sticking their noses outside only when the Twolegs allow them? That's no life! Out here it's wild, and it's free. We come and go as we please." He finished his speech with a proud spit, then meowed mischievously, until you've tasted a fresh-killed mouse, you haven't lived. Have you ever tasted mouse?"

"No," Sandy admitted, a little defensively. "Not yet."

"I guess you'll never understand." Silverpaw sighed. "You weren't born wild. It makes a big difference. You need to be born with warrior blood in your veins, or the feel of the wind in your whiskers. Kitties born into Twoleg nests could never feel the same way."

Sandy remembered the way he had felt in his dream. "That's not true!" he meowed indignantly.

Silverpaw did not reply. He suddenly stiffened midlick, one paw still raised, and sniffed the air. "I smell cats from my Clan," he hissed. "You should go. They won't be pleased to find you hunting in our territory!"

Sandy looked around, wondering how Silverpaw knew any cat was approaching. He couldn't smell anything different on the leaf-scented breeze. But his fur stood on end at the note of urgency in Silverpaw's voice.

"Quick!" hissed Silverpaw again. "Run!"

Sandy prepared to spring into the bushes, not knowing which way was safe to jump.

He was too late. A voice meowed behind him, firm and menacing. "What's going on here?"

Sandy turned to see a large dark reddish-brown she-cat strolling majestically out from the undergrowth. She was magnificent. White hairs streaked her muzzle, and an ugly scar parted the fur across her shoulders, but her smooth dark reddish-brown coat shone like a dark flame in the moonlight.

"Oakstar!" Beside Sandy, Silverpaw crouched down and narrowed his eyes. He crouched even lower when a second cat - a handsome, snow-white cat - followed the dark reddish-brown cat into the clearing.

"You shouldn't be so near Twolegplace, Silverpaw!" growled the snow-white cat angrily, narrowing his sky blue eyes.

"I know, Frostfur, I'm sorry." Silverpaw looked down at his paws.

Sandy copied Silverpaw and crouched low to the forest floor, his ears twitching nervously. These cats had an air of strength he had never seen in any of his garden friends. Maybe what Dottie had warned him about was true.

"Who is this?" asked the she-cat.

Sandy flinched as she turned her gaze on him. Her piercing amber eyes made him feel even more vulnerable.

"He's no threat," mewed Silverpaw quickly. "He's not another Clan warrior, just a Twoleg pet from beyond our territories."

Just a Twoleg pet! The words inflamed Sandy, but he held his tongue. The warning look in Oakstar's stare told him that she had observed the anger in his eyes, and he looked away.

"This is Oakstar; she's *leader* of my Clan!" Silverpaw hissed to Sandy under his breath. "And Frostfur. He's my mentor, which means he's training me to be a warrior."

"Thank you for the introduction, Silverpaw," meowed Frostfur coolly.

Oakstar was still staring at Rusty. "You fight well for a Twoleg pet," she meowed.

Sandy and Silverpaw exchanged confused glances. How could she know?"

"We have been watching you both," Oakstar went on, as if she had read their thoughts. "We wondered how you would deal with an

intruder, Silverpaw. You attacked him bravely."

Silverpaw looked pleased at Oakstar's praise.

"Sit up now, both of you!" Oakstar looked at Sandy. "You too, kittypet." He sat up immediately and held Oakstar's gaze evenly as she addressed him.

"You reacted well to the attack, kittypet. Silverpaw is stronger than you, but you used your wits to defend yourself. And you turned to face him when he chased you. I've not seen a kittypet do that before."

Sandy managed to nod his thanks, taken aback by such unexpected praise. Her next words surprised him even more.

"I have been wondering how you would perform out here, beyond the Twolegplace. We patrol this border frequently, so I have often seen you sitting on your boundary, staring out into the forest. And now, at last, you have dared to place your paws here." Oakstar stared at Sandy thoughtfully. "You do seem to have a natural hunting ability. Sharp eyes. You would have caught that mouse if you had not hesitated so long."

"R-really?" Sandy stammered.

Frostfur spoke now. His deep meow was respectful but insistent. "Oakstar, this is a *kittypet*. He should not be hunting in Thunderclan territory. Send him home to his Twolegs!"

Sandy prickled at Frostfur's dismissive words. "Send me home?" he mewed impatiently. Oakstar's words had made him glow with pride. She had noticed him; she had been impressed by him. "But I've only come here to hunt for a mouse or two. I'm sure there's enough to go around."

Oakstar had turned her head to acknowledge Frostfur's words. Now her gaze snapped back to Sandy. Her amber eyes were blazing with anger. "There's never enough to go around," she spat. "If you didn't live such a soft, overfed life, you would know that!"

Sandy was confused by Oakstar's sudden rage, but one glance at the

horrified look on Silverpaw's face was enough to tell him he had spoken too freely. Frostfur stepped to his leader's side. Both warriors loomed over him now. Sandy looked into Oakstar's threatening stare and his pride dissolved. These were not cozy fireside cats he was dealing with - they were mean, hungry cats who were probably going to finish what Silverpaw had started.

Chapter 2

"Well?" hissed Oakstar, her face only a mouse-length from his now. Frostfur remained silent as he towered over Sandy.

He flattened his ears and crouched under the white warrior's cold stare. His fur prickled uncomfortably. "I am no threat to your Clan." he mewed, looking down at his trembling paws.

"You threaten our Clan when you take our food," yowled Oakstar. "You have plenty of food in your Twoleg nest already. You come here only to hunt for sport. But we hunt to survive."

The truth of the warrior queen's words pierced Sandy like a blackthorn, and suddenly he understood her anger. He stopped trembling, sat up, and straightened his ears. He raised his eyes to meet hers. "I had not thought of it that way before. I am sorry," he meowed solemnly. "I will not hunt here again."

Oakstar let her hackles fall and signaled to Frostfur to step back. "You are an unusual kittypet, Sandy," she meowed.

Silverpaw's sigh of relief made Sandy's ears twitch. He heard the approval in Oakstar's voice and noticed as she swapped a meaningful glance with Frostfur. The look made him curious. What flashed between the two warriors? Quietly he asked, "Is survival here really so hard?"

"Our territory covers only part of the forest," answered Oakstar. "We compete with other Clans for what we have. And this year, late newleaf means prey is scarce."

"Is your Clan very big?" Sandy meowed, his eyes wide.

"Big enough," replied Oakstar. "Our territory can support us, but there is no prey left over."

"Are you all warriors, then?" Sandy mewed. Oakstar's guarded

answers were just making him more and more curious.

Frostfur answered him. "Some are warriors. Some are too young or too old or too busy caring for kits to hunt."

"And you all live and share prey together?" Sandy murmured in awe, thinking a little guiltily of his own easy, selfish life.

Oakstar looked again at Frostfur. The white tom stared back at her steadily. At last she returned her gaze to Sandy and meowed, "Perhaps you should find out these things for yourself. Would you like to join Thunderclan?"

Sandy was so surprised, he couldn't speak.

Oakstar went on: "If you did, you would train with Silverpaw to become a Clan warrior."

"But kittypets can't be warriors! Silverpaw blurted out. "They don't have warrior blood!"

A sad look clouded Oakstar's eyes. "Warrior blood," she echoed with a sigh. "Too much of that has been spilled lately."

Oakstar fell silent and Frostfur meowed, "Oakstar is only offering you training, young kit. There is no guarantee you would become a full warrior. It might prove too difficult for you. After all, you are used to a comfortable life."

Sandy was stung by Frostfur's words. He swung his head around to face the white tom. "Why offer me the chance, then?"

But it was Oakstar who answered. "You are right to question our motives, young one. The fact is, Thunderclan needs more warriors."

"Understand that Oakstar does not make this offer lightly," warned Frostfur. "If you wish to train with us, we will have to take you into our Clan. You must either live with us and respect our ways, or return to your Twolegplace and never come back. You cannot live with a paw in each world."

A cool breeze stirred the undergrowth, ruffling Sandy's fur. He

shivered, not with the cold, but with excitement at the incredible possibilities opening up in front of him.

"Are you wondering if it's worth giving up your comfortable kittypet life?" asked Oakstar gently. "But do you realize the price you will pay for your warmth and food?"

Sandy looked at her, puzzled. Surely his encounter with these cats had proved to him just how easy and luxurious his life was.

"I can tell that you are still a tom," Oakstar added, "Despite the Twoleg stench that clings to your fur."

"What do you mean–*still* a tom?"

"You haven't yet been taken by the Twolegs to see the Cutter," meowed Oakstar gravely. "You would be very different then. Not quite so keen to fight a Clan cat, I suspect!"

Sandy was confused. He suddenly thought of Henrietta, who had become fat and lazy since her visit to the vet. Was that what Oakstar meant by the Cutter?

"The Clan may not be able to offer you such easy food or warmth," continued Oakstar. "In the season of leaf-bare, nights in the forest can be cruel. The Clan will demand great loyalty and hard work. You will be expected to protect the Clan with your life if necessary. And there are many mouths to feed. But the rewards are great. You will remain a tom. You will be trained in the ways of the wild. You will learn what it is to be a real cat. The strength and the fellowship of the Clan will always be with you, even when you hunt alone."

Sandy's head reeled. Oakstar seemed to be offering him the life he had lived so many times, and so tantalizing, in his dreams, but could he live like that for real?

Frostfur interrupted his thoughts. "Come, Oakstar, let's not waste any more time here. We must be ready to join the other patrol at moonhigh. Goldenflower will wonder what has become of us." He stood up and flicked his tail expectantly.

"Wait," Sandy meowed. "Can I think about your offer?"

Oakstar looked at him for a long moment and nodded. "Frostfur will be here tomorrow at sunhigh," She told him. "Give him your answer then."

Oakstar murmured a low signal, and in a single movement the three cats turned and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Sandy blinked. He stared–excited, uncertain–up past the ferns that encircled him, through the canopy of leaves, to the stars that glittered in the sky. The scent of the Clan cats still hung heavy in the evening air. And as Sandy turned and headed for home, he felt a strange sensation inside him, tugging him back into the depths of the forest. His fur prickled deliciously in the light wind, and the rustling leaves seemed to whisper his name into the shadows.

Chapter 3

That morning, as Sandy slept off his night's wanderings, the mouse dream came again, even more vivid than before. Free of his collar, beneath the moon, he stalked the timid creature. But this time he was aware of being watched. Shining from the shadows of the forest he saw dozens of yellow eyes. The Clan cats had entered his dream world.

Sandy woke, blinking in the bright sunshine that was streaming across the kitchen floor. His fur felt heavy and thick with warmth. His food bowl had been topped up, and his water bowl rinsed out and filled with bitter-tasting Twoleg water. Sandy preferred drinking from puddles outside, but when it was hot, or he was very thirsty, he had to admit it was easier to lap up the water indoors. Could he really abandon this comfortable life?

He ate, then pushed his way out of the cat flap into the garden. The day promised to be warm, and the garden was heavy with the smell of early blossoms.

"Hello, Sandy!" mewed a voice from the fence. It was Dottie. "You should have been awake an hour ago. The baby sparrows were wout stretching their wings."

"Did you catch any?" Sandy asked.

Dottie yawned and licked her nose. "Couldn't be bothered. I'd already eaten enough at home. Anyway, why weren't *you* out earlier? Yesterday you were complaining about Henrietta sleeping her time away, and today you're not much better yourself."

Sandy sat down on the cool earth beside the fence an curled his tail neatly over his front paws. "I was in the woods last night," he reminded his friend. At once he felt the blood stir in his veins and his fur stiffen.

Dottie looked down at him, her eyes wide. "Oh, yes, I forgot! How

was it? Did you catch anything? Or did anything catch you?"

Sandy paused, not sure how to tell his old friend what had happened. "I met some wild cats," he began.

"What!" Dottie was clearly shocked. "Did you get into a fight?"

"Sort of." Sandy could feel the energy surging through his body again as he recalled the strength and power of the Clan cats.

"Were you hurt? What happened?" Dottie prompted him eagerly.

"There were three of them. Bigger and stronger than any of us."

"And you fought all three of them!" Dottie interrupted, her tail twitching with excitement.

"No!" Sandy mewed hastily. "Just the youngest one; the other two came later."

"How come they didn't shred you to pieces?"

"They just warned me to leave their territory. But then..." Sandy hesitated.

"What!" mewed Dottie impatiently.

"They asked me to join their Clan."

Dottie's whiskers quivered disbelievingly.

"They did!" Sandy insisted.

"Why would they do that?"

"I don't know," Sandy admitted. "I think they need extra paws in their Clan."

"Sounds a bit odd to me," Dottie mewed doubtfully. "I wouldn't trust them if I were you."

Sandy looked at Dottie. His black-and-white friend had never shown any interest in venturing into the woods. She was perfectly content

living with her housefolk. She would never understand the restless longing that Sandy's dreams stirred in him night after night.

"But I do trust them," Sandy purred softly. "And I've made up my mind. I'm going to join them."

Dottie scrambled down from the fence and stood in front of Sandy. "Please don't go, Sandy," she mewed in alarm. "I might never see you again."

Sandy nudged her affectionately with his head. "Don't worry. My housefolk will get another cat. You'll get on with him fine. You get along with everyone!"

"But it won't be the same!" Dottie wailed.

Sandy twitched his tail impatiently. "That's just the point. If I stay around here till they take me to the Cutter, I won't be the same either."

Dottie looked puzzled. "The Cutter?" she echoed.

"The vet," Sandy explained. "To be altered, like Henrietta was."

Dottie shrugged and stared down at her paws. "But Henrietta's all right," she mumbled. "I mean, I know she's a bit lazier now, but she's not unhappy. We could still have fun."

Sandy felt his heart fill with sadness at the thought of leaving his friend. "I'm sorry, Dottie. I'll miss you, but I have to go."

Dottie didn't reply, but stepped forward and gently touched Sandy's nose with her own. "Fair enough. I can see I can't stop you, but at least let's spend one more morning together."

Sandy found himself enjoying the morning even more than usual, visiting his old haunts with Dottie, sharing words with the cats he had grown up with. Every one of his senses felt supercharged, as if he were poised before a huge jump. As sunhigh approached, Sandy grew more and more impatient to see if Frostfur would really be waiting for him. The idle buzz of meows from his old friends seemed to fade into the background as all his sense strained toward

the woods.

Sandy jumped down from his garden fence for the last time and crept into the woods. He had said his good-byes to Dottie. Now all his thoughts were focused on the forest and the cats who lived in it.

As he approached the spot where he had met with the Clan cats the night before, he sat down and tasted the air. Tall trees shielded the ground from the midday sunshine, making it comfortably cool. Here and there a patch of sunlight shone through a gap in the leaves and lit up the forest floor. Sandy could smell the same cat-scent as last night, but he had no idea whether it was old or new. He lifted his head and sniffed uncertainty.

"You have a lot to learn," meowed a deep voice. "Even the tiniest Clan kit knows when another cat is nearby."

Sandy saw a pair of blue eyes glinting from beneath a bramble bush. Now he recognized the accent: it was Frostfur.

"Can you tell if I am alone?" asked the white tom, stepping into the light.

Hastily, Sandy sniffed again. The scents of Oakstar and Silverpaw were still there, but not as strong as the previous night. Hesitantly, he mewed, "Oakstar and Silverpaw aren't with you this time."

"That's right," meowed Frostfur. "But someone else is."

Sandy stiffened as a second Clan cat strode into the clearing.

"This is Brindleface," purred Frostfur. "One of Thunderclan's senior warriors."

Sandy looked at the tom and felt his spine tingle with cold fear. Was this a trap? Long-bodied and muscular, Brindleface stood in front of Sandy and gazed down at him. His gray tabby coat was thick and unmarked and his eyes were the green of fresh moss. Sandy flattened his ears warily, and tensed his muscles in preparation for a fight.

"Relax, before your fear-scent brings unwanted attention," growled

Frostfur. "We are here only to take you to our camp."

Sandy sat very still, hardly daring to breathe, as Brindleface stretched his nose forward and gave him a curious sniff.

"Hello, young one," murmured the gray tabby cat. "I've heard a lot about you."

Sandy dipped his head in greeting.

"Come, we can speak more once we are in the camp," ordered Frostfur, and, without pausing, he and Brindleface leaped away into the undergrowth. Sandy jumped to his paws and followed as quickly as he could.

The two warriors made no allowances for Sandy as they sped through the forest, and before long he was struggling to keep up. Their pace barely slowed as they led him over fallen trees that they cleared in a single leap, but Sandy had to scramble over paw by paw. They passed through sharply fragrant pine trees, where they had to jump across deep gullies churned up by a Twoleg tree-eater. From the safety of his garden fence, Sandy had often heard it roaring and snarling in the distance. One gully was too wide to jump, half-filled with slimy, foul-smelling water. The Clan cats waded through without hesitating.

Sandy had never put a paw in water before. But he was determined not to show any signs of weakness, so he narrowed his eyes and followed, trying to ignore the uncomfortable wetness that soaked his belly fur.

At last Frostfur and Brindleface paused. Sandy skidded to a halt behind them and stood panting while the two warriors stepped onto a rock that rested on the edge of a small ravine.

"We are very close to our camp now," meowed Frostfur.

Sandy strained to see any signs of life–moving leaves, a glimpse of fur among the bushes below, but his eyes saw nothing except the same undergrowth that covered the rest of the forest floor.

"Use your nose. You must be able to scent it," hissed Brindleface

impatiently.

Sandy closed his eyes and sniffed. Brindleface was right. The scents here were very different from the cat-scent he was used to. The air smelled stronger, speaking of many, many different cats.

He nodded thoughtfully and announced, "I can smell cats."

Frostfur and Brindleface exchanged amused looks.

"There will come a time, if you are accepted into the Clan, when you will know each cat-scent by name," Frostfur meowed. "Follow me!" He led the way nimbly down the boulders to the bottom of the ravine, and pushed his way through a thick patch of gorse. Sandy followed, and Brindleface took up the rear. As his sides scraped against the prickly gorse, Sandy looked down and noticed that the grass beneath his paws was flattened into a broad, strong-smelling track. *This must be the main entrance into the camp,* he thought.

Beyond the gorse, a clearing opened up. The ground at the center was bare, hard earth, shaped by many generations of pawsteps. This camp had been here a long time. The clearing was dappled by sunshine, and the air felt warm and still.

Sandy looked around, his eyes wide. There was cats everywhere, sitting alone or in groups, sharing food or purring quietly as they groomed one another.

"Just after sunhigh, when the day is hottest, is a time for sharing tongues," Frostfur explained.

"Sharing tongues?" Sandy echoed.

"Clan cats always spend time grooming each other and sharing the news of the cay," Brindleface told him. "We call it sharing tongues. It is a custom that binds the members of the Clan together."

The cats had obviously smelled Sandy's foreign scent, for heads began to turn and stare curiously in his direction.

Suddenly shy of meeting any cat's gaze directly, Sandy looked around the clearing. It was edged with thick grass, dotted with tree

stumps and a fallen tree. A thick curtain of ferns and gorse shielded the camp from the rest of the woods.

"Over there," meowed Frostfur, flicking his tail toward an impenetrable-looking tangle of brambles, "is the nursery, where the kits are cared for."

Sandy swiveled his ears toward the bushes. He couldn't see through the knot of prickly branches, but he could hear the mewling of several kittens from somewhere inside. As he watched, a black-and-white she-cat squirmed out through a small gap in the front. *That must be one of the queens,* Sandy thought.

A white queen appeared around the bramble bush. The two she-cats exchanged a friendly lick between the ears before the tabby slipped inside the nursery, murmuring to the squealing kits.

"The care of our kits is shared by all of the queens," meowed Frostfur. "All cats serve the Clan. Loyalty to the Clan is the first law in our warrior code, a lesson you must learn quickly if you wish to stay with us."

"Here comes Oakstar," meowed Brindleface, sniffing the air.

Sandy sniffed the air too, and was pleased that he was able to recognize the scent of the reddish-brown she-cat a moment before she appeared from the shadow of a large boulder that lay beside them at the head of the clearing.

"He came," Oakstar purred, addressing the warriors.

Brindleface replied, "Frostfur was convinced he would not."

Sandy noticed the tip of Oakstar's tail twitch impatiently. "Well, what do you think of him?" she asked.

"He kept up well on the return journey, despite his puny size," Brindleface admitted. "He certainly seems strong for a kittypet."

"So it is agreed?" Oakstar looked at Frostfur and Brindleface.

Both cats nodded.

Then I shall announce his arrival to the Clan." Oakstar leaped up onto the boulder and yowled, "Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

Her clear call brought all the cats trotting toward her, emerging like liquid shadows from the edges of the clearing. Sandy stayed where he was, flanked by Frostfur and Brindleface. The other cats settled themselves below the Highrock and looked expectantly up at their leader.

Sandy felt a rush of relief as he recognized Silverpaw's silver-and-black tabby fur among the cats. Beside him sat a young tortoiseshell tom, his black-tipped tail tucked neatly over small white paws. A large dark gray tabby she-cat crouched behind them, the black stripes on her fur looking like shadows on a moonlit forest floor.

When the cats were still, Oakstar spoke. "Thunderclan needs more warriors," she began. "Never before have we had so few apprentices in training. It has been decided that Thunderclan will take in an outsider to train as a warrior..."

Sandy heard indignant mutterings erupt among the Clan cats, but Oakstar silenced them with a firm yowl. "I have found a cat who is willing to become an apprentice of Thunderclan."

"*Lucky* to become an apprentice," caterwauled a loud voice above the ripple of shock that spread through the cats.

Sandy craned his neck and saw a pale tabby cat standing up and glaring defiantly at the leader.

Oakstar ignored the tabby and addressed all of her Clan. "Frostfur and Brindleface have met this young cat, and they agree with me that we should train him with the other apprentices."

Sandy looked up at Frostfur, then back at the Clan, to find all eyes were on him now. His fur prickled and he swallowed nervously. There was silence for a moment. Sandy was sure they must all be able to hear his heart pulsing and smell his fear-scent.

Now a deafening crescendo of caterwauling rose from the crowd.

"Where does he come from?"

"Which Clan does he belong to?"

"What a strange scent he carries! That's not the scent of any Clan *I* know!"

Then one yowl in particular sounded out above the rest. "Look at his collar! He's a kittypet!" It was the pale tabby again. "Once a kittypet, always a kittypet. This Clan needs wildborn warriors to defend it, not another soft mouth to feed."

Frostfur bent down and hissed into Sandy's ear. "That tabby is Longtail. She smells your fear. They all do. You must prove to her and the other cats that your fear won't hold you back."

But Sandy couldn't move. How could he ever prove to these fierce cats that he wasn't just a kittypet?

The tabby continued to jeer at him. "Your collar is a mark of the Twolegs, and that noisy jingling will make you a poor hunter at best. At worst, it will bring the Twolegs into our territory, looking for the poor lost kittypet who fills the woods with his pitiful tinkling."

All the cats howled in agreement.

Longtail went on, well aware that she had the support of her audience. "The noise of your treacherous bell will alert our enemies, even if your Twoleg *stench* doesn't!"

Frostfur hissed into Sandy's ear once more: "Do you back down from a challenge?"

Sandy still did not move. But this time he was trying to pinpoint Longtail's position. There she was, just behind a dusky brown tom. Sandy flattened his ears, narrowed his eyes, and, hissing, leaped through the startled cats to fling himself onto his tormentor.

Longtail was completely unprepared for Sandy's attack. She staggered sideways, losing her footing on the hard-baked earth. Filled with rage and desperate to prove himself, Sandy dug his

claws deep into the tabby cat's fur and sank in his teeth. No subtle rituals of swiping and boxing preceded this fight. The two cats were locked in a screaming, writhing tussle that flipped and somersaulted around the clearing at the heart of the camp. The other cats had to spring out of the way to avoid the screeching whirlwind of fur.

As Sandy scratched and struggled, he was suddenly aware that he felt no fear, only exhilaration. Through the roaring of the blood in his ears, he could hear the cats around them wailing with excitement.

Then Sandy felt his collar tighten around his neck. Longtail had gripped it between her teeth and was tugging, and tugging hard. Sandy felt a terrible pressure at his throat. Unable to breathe, he started to panic. He writhed and twisted, but each movement only made the pressure worse. Retching and gulping for air, he summoned up all his strength and tried to pull away from Longtail's grip. And suddenly, with a loud snap, he was free.

Longtail tumbled away from him. Sandy scrambled to his paws and looked around. Longtail was crouching three tail-lengths away. And, dangling from Longtail's mouth, Sandy saw his collar, mangled and broken.

At once, Oakstar leaped down from the Highrock and silenced the noisy crowd with a thunderous caterwaul. Sandy and Longtail remained fixed to the spot, gasping for breath. Clumps of fur hung from their ruffled coats. Sandy could feel a cut stinging above his eye. Longtail's left ear was badly torn, and blood dripped down her lean shoulders onto the dusty ground. They stared at each other, their hostility not yet spent.

Oakstar stepped forward and took the collar from Longtail. She placed it on the ground in front of her and meowed, "The newcomer has lost is Twoleg collar in a battle for his honor. Starclan has spoken its approval–this cat has been released from the hold of his Twoleg owners, and is free to join Thunderclan as an apprentice."

Sandy looked at Oakstar and solemnly nodded his acceptance. He stood up and stepped forward into a shaft of sunshine, welcoming the warmth on his sore muscles. The pool of light blazed bright and

his pal ginger pelt, making his fur glow. Sandy lifted his head proudly and looked at the cats that surrounded him. This time not cat argued or jeered. He had shown himself to be a worthy opponent in battle.

Oakstar approached Sandy and placed the shredded collar on the ground in front of him. She touched his ear gently with her nose. "You look like soft warm sand in this sunlight," she murmured. Her eyes flashed briefly, as if her words had more meaning for her than Sandy knew. "You have fought well." Then she turned to the Clan and announced, "From this day forward, until he has earned his warrior name, this apprentice will be called Sandpaw, in honor of his sand-colored coat."

She stepped back and, with the other cats, waited silently for his next move. Without hesitating, Sandy turned and kicked dust and grass over his collar as though burying his dirt.

Longtail growled and limped out of the clearing toward a fern-shaded corner. The cats split into groups, murmuring to each other excitedly.

"Hey, Sandpaw!"

Sandy heard Silverpaw's friendly voice behind him. *Sandpaw!* A thrill of pride surged through him at the sound of his new name. He turned to greet the silver-and-black tabby apprentice with a welcoming sniff.

"Great fight, Sandpaw!" mewed Silverpaw. "Especially for a kittypet! Longtail is a warrior, although she only finished her training two moons ago. That scar you left on her ear won't let her forget you in a hurry. You've spoiled her good looks, that's for sure."

"Thanks, Silverpaw," Sandpaw replied. "She put up quite a fight, though!" He licked his front paw and began to wipe clean the deep scratch that stung above his eye. As he washed he heard his new name again, echoing among the meows of the cats.

"Sandpaw!"

"Hey, Sandpaw!"

"Welcome, young Sandpaw!"

Sandpaw closed his eyes for a moment and let the voices wash over him.

"Good name, too!" Silverpaw mewed approvingly, jolting him awake.

Sandpaw looked around. "Where did Longtail creep off to?"

"I think she was heading toward Spottedleaf's den." Silverpaw tipped his head toward the fern-enclosed corner Longtail had disappeared into. "He's our medicine cat. Not bad-looking either. Younger and a lot handsomer than most–"

A low yowl next to the two cats stopped Silverpaw mid-speech. They both turned, and Sandpaw recognized the powerful gray tabby cat who had sat behind Silverpaw earlier.

"Darkstripe," mewed Silverpaw, dipping his head respectfully.

The sleek she-cat looked at Sandpaw for a moment. "Lucky your collar snapped when it did. Longtail is a young warrior, but I can't imagine her being beaten by a kittypet!" She spat the word *kittypet* scornfully, then turned and stalked off.

"Now Darkstripe," Silverpaw hissed to Sandpaw under his breath, "is neither young, nor pretty..."

Sandpaw was about to agree with his new friend when he was interrupted by a warning yowl from an old pale tabby cat sitting at the edge of the clearing.

"Speckletail smells trouble!" Silverpaw meowed, immediately alert.

Sandpaw barely had time to look around before a young cat crashed through the bushes and into the camp. She was skinny and–apart from some patches of black on her body–almost fully white from head to toe.

Silverpaw gasped. "That's Patchpaw! Why is she alone? Where's Goldenflower?"

Sandpaw looked at Patchpaw staggering across the floor of the clearing. She was panting heavily. Her coat was ruffled and dusty, and her eyes were wild with fear.

"Who are Patchpaw and Goldenflower?" Sandpaw whispered to Silverpaw, as several other cats raced past him to greet the new arrival.

"Patchpaw's an apprentice. Goldenflower's her mentor," Silverpaw explained quickly. "Patchpaw went out with Goldenflower and Redtail at sunrise on a mission against Riverclan, the lucky furball!"

"Redtail?" Sandpaw echoed, thoroughly confused by all these names.

"Oakstar's deputy," hissed Silverpaw. "But why on earth had Patchpaw come back alone?"

He added to himself. He lifted his head to listen as Oakstar stepped forward.

"Patchpaw?" The she-cat spoke calmly, but a look of worry clouded her amber eyes. The other cats drew back, curling their lips with anxiety.

"What has happened?" Oakstar jumped onto the Highrock and looked down at the trembling cat. "Speak, Patchpaw!"

Patchpaw was still struggling for breath, and her sides heaved fitfully while the dust around her turned red with blood, but still she managed to scramble up onto the Highrock and stand beside Oakstar. She turned to the crowd of eager faces that surrounded her, and summoned enough breath to declare, "Redtail is dead!"

Chapter 4

Shocked yowls rose from the Clan cats and echoed through the forest.

Patchpaw staggered slightly. Her right foreleg glistened, wet with blood that flowed from the deep gash on her shoulder. "We m-met five Riverclan warriors beside the stream, not far from the Sunningrocks," she went on shakily. "Bluefur was among them."

"Bluefur!" Silverpaw gasped beside Sandpaw. "He is the deputy of Riverclan. He's one of the greatest warriors in the forest. Lucky Patchpaw! Wish it could have been me. I'd have really—" Silverpaw was silenced by a fierce glance from the old pale tabby tom who had first sensed Patchpaw's return.

Sandpaw turned his attention back to Patchpaw.

"Redtail warned Bluefur to keep his hunting parties out of Thunderclan territory. She said the next Riverclan warrior to be caught in Thunderclan territory would be killed, but Blue... Bluefur would not back down. He said his Cl-Clan had to be fed, whatever we threatened." Patchpaw paused to wheeze for breath. Her wound was still bleeding heavily, and she stood awkwardly to keep the weight off her shoulder.

"That's when the Riverclan cats attacked. It was hard to see what was happening. The fighting was vicious. I saw Bluefur had Redtail pinned to the ground, but then Redtail..." Suddenly Patchpaw's eyes rolled in her head and she lurched sideways. Half scrambling, half falling, she slithered off the Highrock and collapsed on the ground below.

A black-and-white queen bounded toward her and crouched at her side. She licked her cheek briefly and called out, "Spottedleaf!"

Out of the fern-shaded corner trotted the handsome tortoiseshell Sandpaw had noticed sitting beside Silverpaw earlier. He hurried over to Patchpaw and mewed for the queen to stand back. Then he

used his small pink nose to roll the apprentice over so that he could take a good look at the wound. He glanced up and meowed, "It's all right, Patchpelt, her wounds aren't fatal. But I'll need to fetch some cobwebs to stop the bleeding."

As Spottedleaf sprinted back to his den, the hushed silence in the clearing was broken by a mournful howl. All eyes turned to the direction it had come from.

A massive pale ginger tabby staggered through the gorse tunnel. Between his sharp teeth the warrior held not prey, but the lifeless body of another cat. He dragged the tattered creature into the center of the clearing.

Sandpaw craned his neck and glimpsed a flash of bright ginger tail hanging limply in the dust.

Shock rippled through the Clan like a chill breeze. Beside Sandpaw, Silverpaw dropped into a crouch as grief swept over him. "Redtail!"

"How did this happen, Goldenflower?" demanded Oakstar from her position on the Highrock.

Goldenflower let the scruff of Redtail's neck fall from his mouth. He looked steadily back at Oakstar. "She died with honor, struck down by Bluefur. I couldn't save her, but I managed to take Bluefur's life while he was still gloating over his victory." Goldenflower's voice was strong and deep. "Redtail's death was not in vain, for I doubt we'll see Riverclan hunters in our territory again."

Sandpaw glanced at Silverpaw. The apprentice's eyes were dark with sadness.

After a moment's pause, several of the cats moved forward to lick Redtail's bedraggled fur. As they groomed they purred hushed phrases to the dead warrior.

Sandpaw whispered into Silverpaw's ear, "What are they doing?"

Silverpaw didn't take his eyes off the dead cat as he replied. "Her spirit may have left to join Starclan, but the Clan will share tongues with Redtail one last time."

"Starclan?" Sandpaw echoed.

"It's the tribe of heavenly warriors that watches over all Clan cats. You can see them in Silverpelt."

Sandpaw looked confused, so Silverpaw explained. "Silverpelt is that thick band of stars you see each night stretching across the sky. Each star is a Starclan warrior. Redtail will be among them tonight."

Sandpaw nodded, and Silverpaw stepped forward to share tongues with his dead deputy.

Oakstar had remained silent while the first cats came to pay their respects to Redtail. Now she leaped down from the Highrock and walked slowly toward Redtail's body. The other cats retreated and watched as their leader crouched down to share tongues with her old comrade one last time.

When she had finished she raised her head and spoke. Her voice was low and thick with grief, and the Clan listened in silence. "Redtail was a brave warrior. Her loyalty to Thunderclan could never be doubted. I always relied on her judgment, for it bore witness to the needs of the Clan, and was never swayed by self-interest or pride. She would have made a fine leader."

Then she lowered herself onto her belly, her head bowed, her paws stretched neatly before her, and silently she grieved for her lost friend. Several other cats came and lay down beside her, their bowed heads and hunched backs echoing her mournful pose.

Sandpaw watched. He had not known Redtail, but he couldn't help feeling moved as he witnessed the Clan mourn.

Silverpaw came and stood beside him again. "Fernpaw will be sad," he remarked.

"Fernpaw?"

"Redtail's apprentice. That pale gram tom with the dark flecks over there. I wonder who his new mentor will be?"

Sandpaw glanced over at the small tom who squatted near Redtail's

body, staring unseeing at the ground. Sandpaw looked past him to the Clan leader. "How long will Oakstar sit with her?" he asked.

"Probably the whole night," replied Silverpaw. "Redtail was her deputy for many, many moons. She won't want to let her go too quickly. She was one of the best warriors. Not as big and powerful as Goldenflower or Frostfur, but quick and clever."

Sandpaw looked at Goldenflower, admiring the strength that swelled in his powerful muscles and broad head. His massive body showed signs of his warrior life. One of his ears was split into a deep vee shape, and a thick scar sliced the bridge of his nose.

Suddenly Goldenflower stood up and stalked over to Patchpaw. Spottedleaf was crouching beside Goldenflower's wounded apprentice, using his teeth and front paws to press wads of cobweb onto her shoulder wound.

Sandpaw leaned toward Silverpaw and asked, "What's Spottedleaf doing?"

"Stopping the bleeding. It looked like a nasty cut. And Patchpaw seemed really shaken up. She's always been a bit jumpy, but I've never seen her this bad before. Let's go and see if she's woken up yet."

They made their way through the grieving cats toward the spot where Patchpaw lay and settled themselves a respectful distance away to wait until Goldenflower had finished speaking.

"So, Spottedleaf." Goldenflower addressed the tortoiseshell with a confident meow. "How is she? Do you think you can save her? I've spent a lot of time training her up, and I don't want my efforts to be wasted at the first battle."

Spottedleaf didn't look up from his patient as he replied, "Yes, a pity if, after all your valuable training, she dies in her first fight, eh?" Sandpaw could hear a teasing purr in his soft mew.

"Will she live?" Goldenflower demanded.

"Of course. She just needs to rest."

Goldenflower snorted and looked down at the motionless black-and-white shape. He jabbed Patchpaw with one of his front claws. "Come on, then! Get up!"

Patchpaw didn't move.

"Look at the length of that claw!" Sandpaw hissed.

"Too right!" replied Silverpaw with feeling. "I know *I* wouldn't want to get into a fight with him!"

"Not so fast, Goldenflower!" Spottedleaf placed his paw over Goldenflower's sharp talon and gently moved it away. "This apprentice needs to keep as still as possible until the cut has healed. We don't want her opening her wound by jumping around trying to please you. Leave her alone."

Sandpaw found himself holding his breath as he waited for Goldenflower's reaction. He guessed that few cats dared to give orders to the warrior like that. The big tabby stiffened, and seemed about to speak when Spottedleaf mewed teasingly, "Even *you* know better than to argue with a medicine cat, Goldenflower."

Goldenflower's eyes flashed at the little tortoiseshell's words. "I wouldn't dare argue with *you*, dear Spottedleaf," he purred. He turned to leave and caught sight of Silverpaw and Sandpaw. "Who's this?" he asked Silverpaw, towering above them.

"He's the new apprentice," Silverpaw mewed.

"He smells like a kittypet!" snorted the warrior.

"I *was* a house cat," Sandpaw meowed boldly, "But I am going to train to be a warrior."

Goldenflower looked at him with sudden interest. "Ah, yes. Now I remember. Oakstar mentioned that she had stumbled across some stray kittypet. So she's actually going to try you out, is she?"

Sandpaw sat up very straight, anxious to impress this distinguished Clan warrior. "That's right," he mewed respectfully.

Goldenflower eyes him thoughtfully. "Then I shall watch your progress with interest."

Sandpaw puffed his chest out proudly as Goldenflower stalked away. "Do you think he liked me?"

"I don't think Goldenflower *likes* any apprentices!" whispered Silverpaw.

Just then Patchpaw stirred and twitched her ears. "Has he gone?" she mumbled.

"Who? Goldenflower?" replied Silverpaw, trotting toward her. "Yep, he's gone."

"Hi, there," Sandpaw began, about to introduce himself.

"Go away, both of you!" Spottedleaf protested. "How am I meant to help this cat with all these interruptions!" He impatiently flicked his tail at Silverpaw and Sandpaw and pushed his way between them and his patient.

Sandpaw realized he was serious, despite the lively glimmer in his warm amber eyes.

"Come on then, Sandpaw," mewed Silverpaw. "I'll show you around. See you later, Patchpaw."

The two cats left Spottedleaf with Patchpaw and walked across the clearing.

Silverpaw looked thoughtful. He was clearly taking his duties as a guide very seriously. "You know the Highrock already," he began, flicking his tail toward the big, smooth rock. "Oakstar always addresses the Clan from there. Her den is down there." He lifted his nose toward a hollow in the side of the Highrock. "Her den was carved out many moons ago by an ancient stream." Hanging lichen draped the entrance, sheltering the leader's nest from wind and rain.

"The warriors sleep over here," Silverpaw went on.

Sandpaw followed him to a large bush a few paces away from the Highrock. There was a clear view from here right down to the gorse entrance into the camp. The branches of the bush hung low, but Sandpaw could see a sheltered space inside where the warriors made their nests.

"The senior warriors sleep nearest the center, where it's warmest," explained Silverpaw. "They usually share their fresh-kill together over by that clump of nettles. The younger warriors eat nearby. Sometimes they are invited to join the senior warriors for eating, which is a big honor."

"What about the other Clan cats?" Sandpaw asked, fascinated but feeling rather overwhelmed by all the traditions and rituals of Clan life.

"Well, the queens share warrior quarters when they work as warriors, but when they are expecting kits, or nursing them, they stay in a nest near the nursery. The elders have their own place on the other side of the clearing. Come on, I'll show you."

Sandpaw trotted after Silverpaw, across the clearing, and past the shadowy corner where Spottedleaf had his den. They stopped beside a fallen tree that sheltered a patch of lush grass. Crouched among the soft greenery were four elderly cats tucking into a plump young rabbit.

"Fernpaw and Firepaw would have brought them that." whispered Silverpaw. "One of the apprentices' duties is catching fresh-kill for the elders."

"Hello, youngster," one of the elders greeted Silverpaw.

"Hello, Speckletail," mewed Silverpaw, nodding respectfully.

"This must be our new apprentice. Sandpaw, isn't it?" meowed a second tom. His patchy fur was pale gray, and there was a gap where his other eye should have been.

"That's right," Sandpaw replied, copying Silverpaw's polite nod.

"I'm One-eye," purred the pale gray tom. "Welcome to the Clan."

"Have you two eaten?" meowed Speckletail.

Sandpaw and Silverpaw both shook their heads.

"Well, there's enough here. Fernpaw and Firepaw are turning into fine hunters. Would you mind if these youngsters shared a mouse, Halftail?"

The dark brown queen who lay beside him shook her head. Sandpaw noticed half of his tail was missing.

"What about you, Runningwind?"

The other elder, a tabby she-cat with a gray muzzle, meowed in a voice cracked with age, "Of course not."

"Thank you," mewed Silverpaw eagerly. He stepped forward and took a large mouse from the pole of prey, then dropped it at Sandpaw's feet. "You still haven't tasted mouse?" he asked.

"No," Sandpaw admitted. He suddenly felt excited by the warm smells that were rising from this piece of fresh-kill. His whole body quivered at the thought of sharing his first real food as a Clan member.

"In that case, you can have first bite. Just save me some!" Silverpaw dipped his head and stood back to give Sandpaw room.

Sandpaw crouched down and took a large bite from the mouse. It was juicy and tender, and sang with the flavors of the forest.

"What do you think?" asked Silverpaw.

"Fantastic!" mumbled Sandpaw, his mouth still full.

"Move over then," mewed Silverpaw, stepping forward and bending his head to take a bite.

As the two apprentices shared the mouse, they listened to the elders talk among themselves.

"How long before Oakstar appoints a new deputy?" asked

Speckletail.

"What did you say, Speckletail?" mewed Halftail.

"I think your hearing has become as poor as One-eye's eyesight!" snapped Speckletail impatiently. "I said, how long before Oakstar appoints a new deputy?"

Halftail ignored Speckletail's irritated reply and spoke instead to the tabby queen. "Runningwind, do you remember the day many moons ago when Oakstar herself was appointed deputy?"

Runningwind meweed earnestly, "Oh, yes! It was not long after she lost her kits."

"She'll not be happy to be appointing a new deputy," Speckletail observed. "Redtail served her long and well. But she'll need to make up her mind quickly. According to Clan custom, the choice has to be made before moonhigh after the death of the old deputy."

"At least this time the choice is obvious," meowed One-eye.

Sandpaw raised his head and looked around the clearing. Who could One-eye mean? To Sandpaw, all the warriors looked worthy of becoming deputy. Perhaps he meant Goldenflower; after all, he had avenged Redtail's death.

Goldenflower was sitting not far off, his ears angled toward the elders' conversation.

As Sandpaw stretched with his tongue to lick the last traces of mouse from his whiskers, Oakstar's voice called from the Highrock. Redtail's body still lay in the clearing below, pal gray in the fading light. "A new deputy must be appointed," she meowed. "But first, let us give thanks to Starclan for the life of Redtail. Tonight she sits with her fellow warriors among the stars."

Silence fell as all the cats looked up into the sky, which was beginning to darken as evening crept over the forest.

"And now I shall name Thunderclan's new deputy," Oakstar continued. "I say these words before the body of Redtail, so that her

spirit may hear and approve my choice."

Sandpaw looked at Goldenflower. He couldn't help noticing the hunger in the big warrior's yellow eyes as he stared up at the Highrock.

"Frostfur," meowed Oakstar, "will be the new deputy of Thunderclan."

Sandpaw was curious to see Goldenflower's reaction. But the pale warrior's face revealed nothing as he moved to congratulate Frostfur with a nudge so hearty that it almost pushed the white tom off balance.

"Why didn't she make Goldenflower deputy?" Sandpaw whispered to Silverpaw.

"Probably because Frostfur has been a warrior longer, so he has a lot more experience," Silverpaw murmured back, still looking up at Oakstar.

Oakstar spoke again. "Redtail was also mentor to young Fernpaw. Since there must be no delay in the training of our apprentices, I shall appoint Fernpaw's new mentor immediately. Darkstripe, you are ready for your first apprentice, so you will continue Fernpaw's training. You had a fine mentor in Goldenflower, and I expect you to pass on some of the excellent skills you were taught."

The tabby warrior swelled with pride as she showed her acceptance with a solemn nod. She strode over to Fernpaw, bent her head, and rather awkwardly touched noses with her new apprentice. Fernpaw flicked his tail respectfully, but his eyes were still dull with grief for his lost mentor.

Oakstar raised her voice. "I shall keep a vigil with Redtail's body tonight, before we bury her at sunrise." She jumped down from the Highrock and walked over to lie beside Redtail's body once more. Many of the other cats joined her, Fernpaw and Speckletail among them.

"Should we sit with them too?" Sandpaw suggested. He had to admit

the idea didn't appeal to him much. It had been a busy day and he was beginning to feel tired. All he wanted to do was find somewhere warm and dry to curl up and sleep.

Silverpaw shook his head. "No, only those who were closest to Redtail will share her final night. I'll show you where we sleep. The apprentices' den is over here."

Sandpaw followed Silverpaw to a thick bush of ferns that lay behind a mossy tree stump.

"All the apprentices share their fresh-kill by this stump," Silverpaw told him.

"How many apprentices are there?" Sandpaw asked.

"Not as many as usual—just me, you, Patchpaw, Fernpaw, and Firepaw."

As Silverpaw and Sandpaw settled themselves beside the tree stump, a young she-cat crawled out from beneath the ferns. Her coat was ginger, like Sandpaw's, but much brighter, almost like a brand of fire.

"So here comes the new apprentice!" she meowed, narrowing her eyes.

"Hello," Sandpaw mewed.

The young cat sniffed rudely. "He smells like a kittypet! Don't tell me I'm going to have to share my nest with that revolting stench!"

Sandpaw felt rather taken aback. Since his fight with Longtail, all the cats had been quite friendly. Maybe they had just been distracted by Patchpaw's mews, he thought.

"You'll have to excuse Firepaw," apologized Silverpaw. "I think she must have a furball stuck somewhere. She's not usually this bad-tempered."

"Psst!" spat Firepaw crossly.

"Hold on, youngsters." The deep voice of Brindleface sounded behind the apprentices. "Firepaw! As my apprentice, I expected you to be a little more welcoming to this newcomer."

Firepaw held up her head and looked defiant. "I'm sorry, Brindleface," she purred, not sounding sorry at all. "I just didn't expect to be training with a *kittypet*, that's all!"

"I'm sure you'll get used to it, Firepaw," meowed Brindleface calmly. "Now, it's getting late, and training starts early tomorrow. You three should get some sleep." He gave Firepaw a stern look, and she nodded obediently. As he walked off, she spun around and vanished into the clump of ferns, sniffing once more as she brushed past Sandpaw.

With a flick of his tail, Silverpaw invited Sandpaw to follow him, and led the way after Firepaw. Inside the sleeping area, the ground was lined with soft moss, and the pale moonlight turned everything a delicate shade of green. The air was fragrant with fern scent, and warmer than outside.

"Where do I sleep?" Sandpaw asked.

"Anywhere, just so long as it's not near me!" snarled Firepaw, who was prodding some moss with her paw.

Silverpaw and Sandpaw exchanged glances, but said nothing. Sandpaw raked together a pile of moss with his claws. When he had gathered his bed into a cozy nest, he circled until it was comfortable and settled down. His whole body felt drowsy with contentment. This was him home now. He was a member of Thunderclan.

Chapter 5

"Hey, Sandpaw, wake up!" Silverpaw's meow broke into Sandpaw's dream. He had been chasing a squirrel, up and up, into the topmost branches of a tall oak.

"Training begins at sunrise. Fernpaw and Firepaw are already up," Silverpaw added urgently.

Sandpaw stretched sleepily, then remembered: today was his first day of training. He leaped to his paws. His drowsiness evaporated as excitement surged through his veins.

Silverpaw was giving himself a hasty wash. Between licks, he meowed, "I've just spoken to Frostfur. Patchpaw won't be training with us till her wound is better. She'll probably stay at Spottedleaf's den for another day or two. Fernpaw and Firepaw are on hunting duty. So Frostfur thought you and I could train with him and Goldenflower this morning. We'd better hurry, though," he added. "They'll be waiting!"

Silverpaw led Sandpaw quickly through the gorse entrance of the camp and up the side of the rock-strewn valley. As they climbed over the crest of the ravine, a cool breeze ruffled their fur. Fat, white clouds raced across the blue sky overhead. Sandpaw felt fierce joy well up inside him as he followed Silverpaw down a tree-shaded slope and into a sandy hollow.

Goldenflower and Frostfur were indeed waiting, sitting a few tail-lengths apart on the sun-warmed sand.

"In future, I expect you both to be punctual," growled Goldenflower.

"Don't be too severe, Goldenflower; it was a busy night last night. I expect they were tired," meowed Frostfur gently. "You have not yet been assigned a mentor, Sandpaw," he went on. "For now,

Goldenflower and I will share your training."

Sandpaw nodded enthusiastically, his tail held high, unable to disguise his delight at having two such great warriors as his mentors.

"Come," meowed Goldenflower impatiently. "Today we are going to show you the edges of our territory, so that you know where you will be hunting and what boundaries you need to protect. Silverpaw, it won't do you any harm to remind yourself of the Clan's outer limits."

Without another word, Goldenflower leaped up and bounded out of the sandy hollow. Frostfur nodded to Silverpaw and they took off with equal speed. Sandpaw scrambled after them, his paws slipping on the soft sand.

The trees were thick in this part of the forest, birch and ash trees overshadowed by mighty oaks. The ground was carpeted with crisp dead leaves that rustled beneath their paws. Goldenflower paused to spray his scent on a thick clump of ferns. The other cats stopped beside him.

"There is a Twoleg path here," murmured Frostfur. "Use your nose, Sandpaw. Can you smell anything?"

Sandpaw sniffed. There was the faint scent of a Twoleg, and the stronger smell of a dog, familiar to him from his old home. "A Twoleg has walked his dog along here, but they are gone now," he mewed.

"Good," meowed Frostfur. "Do you think it is safe to cross?"

Sandpaw sniffed again. The odors were weak and seemed overlaid with fresher forest smells. "Yes," he replied.

Goldenflower nodded, and the four cats stalked out from beneath the ferns and crossed the sharp stones of the narrow Twoleg path.

The trees beyond were pine. They grew tall and straight, row after row. It was easy to walk silently here. The ground was thick with layers of dead needles, which prickled against Sandpaw's pads but

felt spongy underneath. There was no undergrowth here to hide in, and Sandpaw sensed tension in the other cats as they stalked unprotected between the tree trunks.

"Twolegs put these trees here," meowed Goldenflower. "They cut them down with foul-smelling creatures, which spew enough fumes to make a kit go blind. Then they take the fallen trees to the Treecut place that lies near here."

Sandpaw stopped and listened for the roar of the tree-eater, which he had heard before.

"The Treecut place will be silent for a few moons more, until the time of greenleaf," explained Silverpaw, noticing his pause.

The cats padded on through the pine forest.

"Twolegplace lies in that direction," meowed Goldenflower, flicking his thick tail to one side. "No doubt you can smell it, Sandpaw. Today, however, we will head the other way."

Eventually they reached another Twoleg path that marked the far edge of the pine forest. They quickly crossed over into the safe bushes of the oak woods beyond. But Sandpaw still sensed anxiety in the other cats.

"We're approaching Riverclan territory," whispered Silverpaw. "The Sunningrocks are over there." He pointed with his soft muzzle to a treeless mound of boulders.

Sandpaw felt his fur stand on end. This was where Redtail had been slain.

Frostfur stopped by a flat gray rock. "This is the boundary between Thunderclan and Riverclan territory. Riverclan rules the hunting grounds beside the great river," he meowed. "Breathe deeply, Sandpaw."

The pungent smell of unfamiliar cats hit the roof of Sandpaw's mouth. He was surprised how different it smelled from the warm cat scents of the Thunderclan camp. And he was also surprised to realize just how familiar and comforting the Thunderclan scents

seemed to him already.

"That is the smell of Riverclan," Goldenflower growled beside him. "Remember it well. It will be strongest at the boundary, because their warriors will have scent-marked the trees along here." With these words, the pale tabby lifted his tail and sprayed his own mark on the flat rock.

"We'll follow this boundary line, as it leads straight to Fourtrees." Frostfur meowed.

He set off quickly, away from the Sunningrocks, followed by Goldenflower. Silverpaw and Sandpaw trotted after them.

"What is Fourtrees?" Sandpaw panted.

"It is where the territories of all four Clans meet," replied Silverpaw. "There are four great oaks there, as old as the Clans—"

"Be quiet!" ordered Goldenflwoer. "Don't forget how close we are to enemy territory!"

The two apprentices fell silent and Sandpaw concentrated on walking silently. They crossed a shallow stream, keeping their paws dry by leaping from boulder to boulder across the pebbly riverbed.

By the time they reached Fourtrees, Sandpaw was feeling completely out of breath and his paws ached. He wasn't used to traveling so far and so fast. He was quite relieved when Frostfur and Goldenflower led them out of the thick woods and stopped at the brw of a bush-covered slope.

It was sunhigh now. The clouds had cleared, and the wind had dropped. Below, in the dazzling sunlight, stood four enormous oaks, their dark green crowns reaching almost to the top of the steep slope.

"As Silverpaw told you," meowed Frostfur to Sandpaw, "this is Fourtrees, where the territories of all four Clans meet. Windclan governs the high ground ahead of us, where the sun sets. You won't be able to catch their scent today—the wind is blowing toward them. But you'll learn it soon enough."

"And Shadowclan holds power over there, in the darkest part of the forest," added Silverpaw, flicking his head sideways. "The elders say that the cold winds from the north blow over the Shadowclan cats and chill their hearts."

"So many Clans!" Sandpaw exclaimed. *And so well organized,* he added to himself, remembering Dottie's lurid tales of wildcats wreaking terror in the forest.

"You see now why prey is so precious," meowed Frostfur. "Why we must fight to protect what little we have."

"But that seems foolish! Why can't the Clans work together and share their hunting grounds, instead of fighting each other?" Sandpaw suggested boldly.

A shocked silence greeted his words.

Goldenflower was the first to reply. "That is treacherous thinking, kittypet," he snapped.

"Don't be too fierce, Goldenflower," warned Frostfur. "The ways of the Clans are new to this apprentice." He looked at Sandpaw. "You speak from your heart, young Sandpaw. This will make you a stronger warrior one day."

Goldenflower growled. "Or it might make him give in to kittypet weakness right at the moment of attack."

Frostfur glanced briefly at Goldenflower before he continued. "The four Clans do come together peacefully, in a Gathering each moon. Here"—he bent his head toward the four mighty oaks below—"is where they meet. The truce lasts for as long as the moon is at its fullest."

"Then there must be a meeting very soon?" Sandpaw suggested, remembering how bright the moonlight had been the night before.

"Indeed there is!" answered Frostfur, sounding impressed. "Tonight, in fact. The Gatherings are very important because they allow the Clans to come together in peace for one night. But you must understand that longer alliances bring more trouble than they're

worth."

"It is our Clan loyalty that makes us strong," Goldenflower meowed in agreement. "If you weaken that loyalty, you weaken our chances of survival."

Sandpaw nodded. "I understand," he mewed.

"Come on," meowed Frostfur, standing up. "Let's keep moving."

They paced along the ridge of the valley where Fourtrees stood. Now they were heading away from the sun as it began to sink in the afternoon sky. They crossed the stream at a place where it was narrow enough to leap over in one jump.

Sandpaw sniffed the air. A new cat-scent touched his mouth glands, strong and sour. "Which Clan is that?" he asked.

"Shadowclan," answered Goldenflower grimly. "We are traveling along their border. Keep your wits about you, Sandpaw. Fresher scents mean that a Shadowclan patrol is in the area."

As Sandpaw nodded, he heard a new noise. He stiffened, but the other cats kept up their pace, heading straight for the ominous rumbling.

"What's that?" he called, trotting to catch up with them.

"You'll see in a moment," replied Frostfur.

Sandpaw peered through the trees ahead. They seemed to be getting thinner, letting in a broad band of sunlight. "Are we at the edge of the woods?" he asked. Then he stopped and took a deep breath. The green forest scents were overlaid with other strange, dark smells. This time it was not cat-scent, but an odor that reminded him of his old Twoleg home. And the rumbling was getting louder, a ceaseless roar that made the ground tremble and ached in Sandpaw's ears.

"This is the Thunderpath," meowed Goldenflower.

Sandpaw followed as Frostfur led them toward the edge of the

forest. Then he sat down and all four cats looked out.

Sandpaw could see a gray path like a river, cutting its way through the forest. The hard gray stone stretched ahead of him so far that the trees on the other side seemed blurred and tiny. Sandpaw shuddered at the bitter smell that rose from the path.

Next moment he leaped back, his fur bristling, as a gigantic monster roared past. The branches of the trees on either side flapped madly in the wind that chased the speeding monster. Sandpaw stared around at the other cats, his eyes wide, unable to speak. He had seen paths like this before near his old Twoleg home, but never this wide, nor with monsters so swift and fierce.

"Scared me too the first time," remarked Silverpaw. "But at least it helps to keep Shadowclan warriors from crossing into our territory. The Thunderpath runs for many pawsteps along our boundary line. And don't worry; those monsters never seem to leave the Thunderpath. You'll be fine as long as you don't go too near."

"It's time we returned to camp," meowed Frostfur. "You have seen all our boundaries now. But we'll avoid Snakerocks, even though the way around is longer. An untrained apprentice would be easy prey for an adder, and I expect you are getting tired, Sandpaw."

Sandpaw couldn't help feeling relieved at the thought of returning to the camp. His head was spinning with all the new smells and sights, and Frostfur was right: he was tired, and hungry. He fell in behind Silverpaw as the cats turned away from the Thunderpath and headed back into the forest.

The dewy scents of evening filled the air as Sandpaw made his way through the gorse entrance into the Thunderclan camp. Fresh-kill was waiting for them. Sandpaw and Silverpaw took their share from the pile that lay in a shady part of the clearing and carried it to the tree stump outside their quarters.

Fernpaw and Firepaw were already there, munching hungrily.

"Hi, there, kittypet," mewed Fernpaw, narrowing his eyes scornfully at Sandpaw. "Enjoy the food *we* caught for you."

"Who knows, you might even learn to catch your own one day!" sneered Firepaw.

"Are you two still on hunting duty?" asked Silverpaw innocently. "Never mind. We've been patrolling our territory borders. You'll be glad to know all is safe."

"I'm sure the other Clans were terrified when they smelled you two coming!" yowled Fernpaw.

"They didn't even dare show their faces," retorted Silverpaw, unable to hide his anger.

"Well, we'll ask them tonight when we see them at the Clan Gathering," mewed Firepaw.

"Are you going?" Sandpaw blurted out, impressed in spite of the apprentices' hostility.

"Of course," replied Fernpaw loftily. "It's a great honor, you know. But don't worry; we'll tell you all about it in the morning."

Silverpaw ignored Fernpaw's gloating and started eating his fresh-kill. Sandpaw was hungry too, and crouched down to eat. He couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy that Fernpaw and Firepaw were actually going to meet the other Clans tonight.

A loud call from Oakstar made Sandpaw look up. He watched several of the Clan warriors and elders gather in the clearing. It was time for the Clan party to leave for the gathering. Fernpaw and Firepaw leaped to their feet and trotted off to join the other cats.

"Bye, you two," called Firepaw over her shoulder. "Have a nice, quiet evening!"

The assembled cats stalked out of the vamp entrance in single file, with Oakstar at the head. Her fur glowed like silver in the moonlight, and she looked calm and confident as she led her Clan to the brief truce between old enemies.

"Have you ever been to a Gathering?" Sandpaw asked Silverpaw wistfully.

"Not yet," replied Silverpaw, crunching loudly on a mouse bone. "But it won't be long now; just you wait. All the apprentices get to go sometime."

The two apprentices ate the rest of their meal in silence. When they had finished, Silverpaw wandered over to Sandpaw and began to groom his head. Together they washed, sharing tongues as Sandpaw had seen the other cats do when he first arrived. Then, tired after the long trek, they pushed their way into their den. They settled down in their nests and quickly fell asleep.

The following morning, Silverpaw and Sandpaw arrived early at the sandy hollow. They had crept out before Firepaw and Fernpaw woke. Sandpaw had been eager to hear about the Gathering, but Silverpaw had dragged him away. "You'll hear about it later, if I know those two," he had mewed.

It promised to be another warm day. And this time Patchpaw came to join them. Thanks to Spottedleaf, her wound was healing well.

Silverpaw played around, scooping leaves into the air and leaping after them. Sandpaw watched, his tail twitching with amusement. Patchpaw sat quietly at one side of the hollow, looking tense and unhappy.

"Cheer up, Patchpaw!" called Silverpaw. "I know you don't like training, but you're not usually this miserable!"

The scents of Frostfur and Goldenflwoer warned the apprentices of their approach, and Patchpaw mewed hastily, "I suppose I'm just worried about my shoulder getting hurt again."

At that moment, Goldenflower emerged from the bushes, closely followed by Frostfur.

"Warriors should suffer their pain silently," growled Goldenflower. He looked Patchpaw straight in the eye. "You need to learn to hold your tongue."

Patchpaw flinched and dropped her eyes to the ground.

"Goldenflower's a bit grumpy today," Silverpaw whispered into

Sandpaw's ear.

Frostfur glanced at his apprentice sternly and announced, "Today we are going to practice stalking. Now, there is a big difference between creeping up on a rabbit and creeping up on a mouse. Can any of you tell me why?"

Sandpaw had no idea, and Patchpaw seemed to have taken Goldenflower's comment to heart and was holding her tongue.

"Come on!" snorted Goldenflower impatiently.

It was Silverpaw who answered: "Because a rabbit will smell you before he sees you, but a mouse will feel your pawsteps through the ground before he even smells you."

"Exactly, Silverpaw! So what must your bear in mind when hunting mice?"

"Step lightly?" Sandpaw suggested.

Frostfur looked approvingly at him. "Quite right, Sandpaw. You must take all your weight into your haunches, so that your paws make no impact on the forest floor. Let's try it!"

Sandpaw watched as Silverpaw and Patchpaw immediately dropped into a stalking crouch.

"Nicely done, Silverpaw!" meowed Frostfur as the two apprentices began to move forward stealthily.

"Keep your rear down, Patchpaw, you look like a duck!" spat Goldenflower. "Now you try it, Sandpaw."

Sandpaw crouched down and began to creep across the forest floor. He felt himself fall instinctively into the right position, and as he stepped forward, as silently and lightly as he could, he felt a glow of pride that his muscles responded so smoothly.

"Well, it's obvious you've known nothing but softness!" growled Goldenflower. "You stalk like a lumbering kittypet! Do you think dinner is going to come and lie down in your food dish and wait to

be eaten?"

Sandpaw sat up quickly as Goldenflower spoke, a little taken aback by his harsh words. He listened carefully to the warrior, determined to get everything right.

"His pace and forward movement will come later, but his crouch is perfectly balanced," Frostfur pointed out mildly.

"Which is better than Patchpaw, I suppose," complained Goldenflower. He cast a scornful look at the black-and-white cat. "Even after two moons of training, you're still putting all your weight on your left side."

Patchpaw looked even more dejected, and Sandpaw couldn't stop himself from blurting out, "Her injury is bothering her, that's all!"

Goldenflower whipped his head around and glared at Sandpaw. "Injuries are a fact of life. She should be able to adapt. Even you, Sandpaw, have learned something this morning. If Patchpaw picked up things as quickly as you, she'd be a credit to me instead of an embarrassment. Imagine being shown up by a kittypet!" he spat angrily at his apprentice.

Sandpaw felt his fur prickle with discomfort. He couldn;t meet Patchpaw's eyes, so he looked down at his paws.

"Well, *I'm* more lopsided than a one-legged badger," mewed Silverpaw, breaking off from his careful stalking to stagger comically across the clearing. "I think I'll have to settle for hunting stupid mice. They won't stand a chance. I'll just wander up to them and sit on them till they surrender."

"Concentrate, young Silverpaw. This is no time for your jokes!" meowed Frostfur sternly. "Perhaps you might focus your mind better if you try out your stalking for real."

All three apprentices looked up brightly.

"I want each one of you to try catching real prey," meowed Frostfur. "Patchpaw, you looked beside the Owltree. Silverpaw, there might be something in that big bramble patch over there. And you,

Sandpaw, follow the rabbit track over that rise; you'll find the dry bed of a winter stream. You may find something there."

The three apprentices bounded away, even Patchpaw finding some extra energy for this challenge.

With the blood pounding in his ears, Sandpaw crept slowly up over the rise. Sure enough, a streambed cut through the trees ahead of him. In leaf-fall, he guessed it would carry the rainwater away from the forest and into the great river that cut through Riverclan territory. Now it was dry.

Sandpaw crept quietly down the bank and crouched on its sandy floor. Every sense felt on fire with tension. Silently he scanned the empty stream for signs of life. He watched for any tiny movement, his mouth open so he could pick up the smallest scent, his ears twisted forward.

Then he smelled mouse. He recognized the odor instantly, remembering his first taste the night before. Wild energy surged through him, but he remained motionless, trying desperately to pinpoint the prey.

He strained his ears forward until he picked up the rapid pulsing of a tiny mouse heart. Then a flash of brown caught his eye. The creature was scrambling through the long grass that draped the edges of the stream. Sandpaw shifted closer, remembering to keep his weight on his haunches until he was within striking distance. Then he pushed back hard on his hindpaws and sprang, kicking up sand as he rose.

The mouse raced away. But Sandpaw was quicker. He scooped it into the air with one paw, threw it onto the sandy streambed, and lunged on top of it. He killed it quickly with one sharp bite.

Sandpaw carefully lifted the warm body between his teeth and returned with his tail held high to the hollow where Goldenflower and Frostfur waited. He had made his first kill. He was a true Thunderclan apprentice now.

Chapter 6

Early morning sunlight streamed down onto the floor as Sandpaw roamed in search of prey. Two moons had passed since he had begun his training. He felt at ease in this environment now. His senses had been awoken and educated in the ways of the woods.

Sandpaw paused to sniff the earth and the cold blind things that moved within it. He caught the scent of a Twoleg that had wandered the forest recently. Now that greenleaf was fully here, leaves were thick on the branches and tiny creatures were busy beneath the carpet of leaf-mold.

Sandpaw made a lean, strong shape as he moved silently through the trees, all his senses alert for the scent trail that would end in a swift kill. Today he had been set his first solo task. He was determined to do well, even if his task was only to bring back fresh-kill for the Clan.

He headed for the stream that he had crossed on that first trek through the Thunderclan hunting grounds. It gurgled and spattered as it ran downhill over the smooth, round pebbles. Sandpaw paused briefly to lap at the cold, clear water, then lifted his head and tested the air again for any scent of prey.

The stench of a fox lay heavy in the air here. The smell was stale, so the fox must have drunk here earlier in the day. Sandpaw recognized the odor; he had smelled it on his first visit to the forest. Since then, Frostfur had taught him it was fox-scent, but, apart from the glimpse of the fox's brush he had caught on that first outing, Sandpaw had still never seen one properly.

He struggled to screen out the fox-stench and concentrate on prey-scent. Suddenly his whiskers pricked as he homed in on the warm blood-beat of prey—a water vole busy about its nest.

A moment later he saw the vole. The fat brown body was darting back and forth along the bank as it gathered grass stalks. Sandpaw's

mouth watered in anticipation. His last meal had been many hours ago, but he dared not hunt for himself until the Clan had been fed. He remembered the words repeated by Frostfur and Goldenflower time and time again: "The Clan must be fed first."

Dropping into a crouch, Sandpaw began to stalk the little creature. His sand-colored belly fur brushed against the damp grass. He crept closer, his eyes never leaving his prey. Almost there. Another moment and he would be near enough to spring....

Suddenly there was a loud rustle in the ferns behind him. The water vole's ears twitched and it disappeared down a hole in the bank.

Sandpaw felt the hackles rising along his spine. Whatever had ruined his first good chance of catching prey would have to pay.

He sniffed the air. He could tell it was a cat, but he realized with a jolt that he couldn't identify which Clan it belonged to—the stale stench of fox still confused his smell-sense.

A growl rose in his throat as he began doubling back in a wide circle. He pricked up his ears and opened his eyes wide, seeking out any movement. He heard the undergrowth rustle again. It was louder now, off to one side. Sandpaw edged closer. He could see the ferns moving, but the fronds still hid the enemy from view. A twig snapped with a sharp cracking noise. *From the noise it's making, it must be big.* Sandpaw thought, preparing himself for a fierce battle.

He leaped for the trunk of an ash and climbed swiftly and silently up to an overhanging branch. Below him the invisible warrior came closer, and closer still. Sandpaw held his breath, judging his moment as the ferns were pushed aside and a large silverish shape emerged.

"Gr-aaar!" The battle cry rumbled in Sandpaw's throat. Claws unsheathed, he launched himself at the enemy and landed squarely on a set of furry, muscular shoulders. He dug in hard, gripping with thorn-sharp claws, ready to deal out a powerful warning bite.

"Wa-ah! What'sat?" The body below him shot straight up in the air, carrying him with it.

"Uh! Silverpaw?" Sandpaw recognized the astonished voice and caught his friend's familiar smell, but he was too fired up to loosen his grip.

"Ambush! Murr-oww!" spat Silverpaw, not realizing that the cat gripping onto his back was Sandpaw. He rolled over and over in an attempt to dislodge his attacker.

"Uufff-ff!" Sandpaw rolled with him, squashed and flattened beneath the heavy body. "It's me—Sandpaw!" he yowled as he struggled to pull free and sheath his claws. Rolling away, he sprang to his feet and gave himself a shake, which rippled all the way along his body to the end of his tail. "Silverpaw! It's me," he repeated. "I thought you were an enemy warrior!"

Silverpaw rose to his feet. He winced and shook himself. "It felt like it!" he grumbled, twisting his head around to lick his sore shoulders. "You've raked me to shreds!"

"Sorry," Sandpaw mumbled. "But what was I supposed to think, with you creeping up on me like that?"

"Creeping up!" Silverpaw's eyes were round with indignation. "That was my best stealth crouch."

"Stealth! You still stalk like a lopsided badger!" Sandpaw teased. He flattened his ears playfully.

Silverpaw gave a hiss of delight. I'll show you lopsided!"

The two cats leaped at each other and began rolling over and over in a play-fight. Silverpaw swiped at Sandpaw with a hefty paw and the young apprentice's head buzzed with stars.

"Uufff-ff!" Sandpaw shook his head to clear it and then launched a counterattack.

He managed to get in a couple of paw strikes before Silverpaw overpowered him and held him down. Sandpaw let his body go limp.

"You give up too easily!" mewed Silverpaw, loosening his grip. As

he did so, Sandpaw sprang to his feet, firing Silverpaw off his back and into the undergrowth.

Sandpaw leaped after him and pinned him to the ground. "'Surprise is the warrior's greatest weapon,'" he crowed, quoting one of Frostfur's favorite phrases. He jumped nimbly off Silverpaw and began to squirm around in the leaf litter, enjoying his easy victory and the warmth of the earth against his back.

Silverpaw seemed unbothered by his second defeat of the morning. It was too fine a day for bad temper. "So how're you getting on with your task?" he asked.

Sandpaw sat up. "I was doing just fine till you came along! I was about to catch a vole when your noisy trampling frightened it off."

"Oh, sorry," mewed Silverpaw.

Sandpaw looked at his crestfallen friend. "That's okay. You didn't know," he purred. "Anyway," he continued, "shouldn't you be heading to meet the patrol on the Windclan border? I thought you had to give them a message from Oakstar."

"Yeah, but there's plenty of time. I was going to do a little hunting first. I'm starving!"

"Me too. But I've got to hunt for the Clan before I can hunt for myself."

"I bet Fernpaw and Firepaw used to swallow a shrew or two when they were on hunting duty," snorted Silverpaw.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did, but this is my first solo assignment...."

"And you want to do it right; I know." Silverpaw sighed.

"What is the message from Oakstar, anyway?" Sandpaw asked, changing the subject.

"She wants the patrol to wait at the Great Sycamore until she joins them at sunhigh. Seems that some Shadowclan cats have been

prowling around. Oakstar wants to check things out."

"You'd best get going then," Sandpaw reminded him.

"The Windclan hunting grounds aren't too far from here. There's plenty of time," answered Silverpaw confidently. "And I suppose I should help out after losing you that vole."

"It doesn't matter," Sandpaw mewed. "I'll find another. It's such a warm day, there should be quite a few out and about."

"True. But you still have to catch them." Silverpaw nibbled at a front claw, stripping off a piece of the outer sheath thoughtfully. "You know, that could take you until way past sunhigh, maybe even until sunset."

Sandpaw nodded without enthusiasm as his belly gave a rumble. He would probably have to make three or four hunting trips before he had caught enough prey. Silverpelt would be in the sky before he got a chance to eat.

Silverpaw stroked his whiskers. "Come on; I'll help you get started. I owe you that, at least. We should be able to catch a couple of voles before I have to get going."

Sandpaw followed Silverpaw upstream, glad of the company and the help. The fox-stench was still in the air, but suddenly it smelled stronger.

Sandpaw paused. "Can you smell that?" he asked

Silverpaw stopped and sniffed the air too. "Fox, Yeah, I smelled it earlier."

"Doesn't it smell fresher to you now, though?" Sandpaw asked.

Silverpaw sniffed again, opening his mouth slightly. "You're right," he murmured, lowering his voice. He swiveled his head to look across the stream at the bushes in the woods beyond. "Look!" he whispered.

Sandpaw looked. He saw something red and thick-haired moving

among the bushes. It stepped into a clearing in the undergrowth and Sandpaw saw a low body, glinting red in the dappled sunlight. Its tail was heavily furred and it had a long, narrow snout.

"So that's a fox?" Sandpaw whispered. "What an ugly muzzle!"

"You can say that again!" agreed Silverpaw.

"I was following one of those when we first... met," whispered Sandpaw.

"More likely it was following you, you idiot!" hissed Silverpaw. "Never trust a fox. Looks like a dog, behaves like a cat. We must warn the queens that one has strayed into our territory. Foxes are as bad as badgers when it comes to killing young kits. I'm just glad you didn't catch up with the one you saw last time. He'd have made mousemeat out of a tiny scrap like you." Sandpaw looked a little put out, and Silverpaw added, "You'd stand a better chance these days, though. Anyway, Oakstar will probably send a warrior patrol to scare it off. Put the queens' minds at rest."

The fox had not noticed them, so the two apprentices continued along the stream.

"So what does a badger look like?" Sandpaw asked as they prowled along, sniffing to either side.

"Black and white, short legs. You'll know one when you meet one. They're bad-tempered, lumbering animals. They're less likely to raid the nursery than a fox, but they have a vicious bite. How do you think old Halftail earned her name? She hasn't been able to climb a tree since a badger bit her tail off!"

"Why not?"

"Scared of falling. A cat needs his tail if he wants to land on his feet. It helps him spin in midair."

Sandpaw nodded in understanding.

As Sandpaw had predicted, hunting was good that day. Before long, Silverpaw had pounced on a small mouse and Sandpaw had caught

a thrush. He quickly took its life. No time to practice killing techniques today; there were too many hungry mouths waiting back at camp. Sandpaw kicked earth over the prey, so that it would be safe from predators until he came back for it.

Suddenly a squirrel broke cover.

Sandpaw burst into action "After it!" he called, pelting at full stretch over the springy woodland floor with Silverpaw at his heels.

They slid to a halt as the squirrel scampered upward into a birch.

"Lost it!" Silverpaw growled in disappointment.

Panting, the two cats stopped to catch their breath. The acrid stench that hit their mouths and noses surprised them.

"The Thunderpath," Sandpaw mewed. "I didn't realize we'd come so far."

The two cats edged forward to peer out of the forest at the great, dark path. It was the first time they had been here alone. A trail of noisy creature growled along the hard surface, their dead eyes staring straight ahead.

"Yuck!" Silvperaw snorted. "Those monsters really stink!"

Sandpaw twitched his ears in agreement. The choking smells made his throat sting. "Have you ever been across the Thunderpath?" he mewed.

Silverpaw shook his head.

Sandpaw took a step out of the cover of the forest. A border of oily grass lay between the trees and the Thunderpath. He crept slowly out onto it, and then shrank back as a stinking monster hurtled past.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Silverpaw mewed.

Sandpaw didn't reply. He waited till there were no monsters in sight. Then he edged forward again, across the grass, right to the

edge of the path. Cautiously, he reached out a paw to touch it. It felt warm, almost sticky, heated by the sun. He looked up, staring across the Thunderpath. Was that a pair of eyes glinting out of the forest on the other side? He sniffed the air, but smelled nothing except the stench of the great gray path. The eyes on the other side were still shining in the shadows. Then they blinked, slowly.

Sandpaw was sure now. It was a Shadowclan warrior, and it was staring straight at him.

"Sandpaw!" Silverpaw's voice made Sandpaw jump, just as a huge monster, taller than a tree, roared past his nose. The wind from it almost toppled him over. Sandpaw turned and ran as fast as he could back into the safety of the forest.

"You mouse-brained fool!" spat Silverpaw. His whiskers trembled with fear and anger. "What were you doing?"

"I just wondered what the Thunderpath felt like," Sandpaw muttered. His whiskers were trembling too.

"Come on," hissed Silverpaw edgily. "Let's get out of here!"

Sandpaw followed Silverpaw as he leaped away back into the forest. Once they were a safe distance from the Thunderpath, Silverpaw stopped to catch his breath.

Sandpaw sat down and began to lick his ruffled fur. "I think I saw a Shadowclan warrior," he mewed between licks. "In the forest on the other side of the Thunderpath."

"A Shadowclan warrior!" echoed Silverpaw, his eyes wide. "Really?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"Well, it's a good thing that monster came past when it did," retorted Silverpaw. "Where there's one Shadowclan warrior, there's more, and we're no match for them yet. We'd better get out of here." He looked up at the sun, which was almost directly overhead. "I'd better get a move on if I want to meet that patrol on time," he mewed. "See you later." He sprang away into the undergrowth, calling as he went, "You never know; Frostfur might let me come

and help you with the hunting once I've delivered this message."

Sandpaw watched him go. He envied Silverpaw, wishing he were off to join a warrior patrol. But at least he'd have something to tell Fernpaw and Firepaw when he returned to camp. Today he had seen his first Shadowclan warrior.

Chapter 7

Sandpaw retraced his steps and headed back toward the stream. He thought of those eyes burning from the darkness of the Shadowclan territory.

Suddenly he caught a faint smell on the breeze.

A stranger! Perhaps that Shadowclan warrior...

Instantly a growl rumbled in Sandpaw's throat. The scent message told him many things. The stranger was a she-cat, not young and definitely not from Thunderclan. She carried no distinct scent from any of the Clans, but Sandpaw could tell she was tired, hungry, and sick, and she was in an ugly mood.

Dropping low, Sandpaw moved forward, heading toward the scent. Then he paused in puzzlement. The warrior scent was fainter now. He sniffed again.

Suddenly, with a lightning movement, a snarling ball of fur burst from the bushes behind him.

Sandpaw screeched in shock as the she-cat slammed into him, knocking him sideways. Two heavy paws clamped down onto his shoulders, and iron jaws closed around the back of his neck. "Murr-oww!" he grunted, already thinking fast. If the other cat were to sink its fangs too deep, it would all be over.

He forced himself to go limp, relaxing his muscles as if in submission, and let out a pretend howl of alarm.

The she-cat opened her mouth to give a triumphant yowl. "Ah, a puny apprentice. Easy prey for Raggedpelt," she hissed.

At the insult, Sandpaw felt a surge of fury. *Just wait.* He'd show this coughed-up furball what kind of warrior he was! *But not yet,* he told himself. *Wait until you feel her teeth again.*

Raggedpelt bit down. Sandpaw surged upward with all the strength in his powerful young body. The she-cat gave a snarl of surprise as she was thrown clear. She tumbled backward into a gorse bush.

Sandpaw shook himself. "Not such easy prey, huh?"

Raggedpelt hissed defiance as she tore herself free from the clinging branches. "Not bad, young apprentice," she spat back. "But you'll need to do a lot better!"

Sandpaw blinked when he saw his opponent clearly for the first time. The she-cat was large and muscular with round amber eyes. Her dark brown tabby fur was long and matted into smelly clumps. One of her ears was torn and shredded, and her nose was traced with the scars of many old battles.

Sandpaw stood his ground. He puffed out his chest and glared a challenge into the intruder's face. "You're in Thunderclan's hunting ground. Move on!"

"Who's going to make me?" Raggedpelt drew back her lip defiantly, exposing stained and broken teeth. "I will hunt. *Then* I will leave. Or maybe I'll just stay awhile...."

"Enough talk," Sandpaw spat, feeling the stir of ancient cat spirits deep inside him. There was no trace of the house cat in him now. His warrior blood was up. He was itching to fight, to defend his territory and protect his Clan.

Raggedpelt seemed to sense the change in him. Her fierce amber eyes sparked with new respect. Dipping her head and breaking eye contact, she started to back off. "No need to be hasty, now," she purred in a silky tone.

Sandpaw wasn't fooled by her trickery. Claws extended and fur on end, he leaped forward, his war cry ringing out: "Grr-aaar!"

With a hiss of rage the other cat responded. Snarling and spitting, young cats and old locked together. They rolled over and over, teeth and claws flashing. Ears pressed flat to his head, Sandpaw fought to get a grip. But the she-cat's clumpy fur snagged in his

claws, and he couldn't break through to skin.

Then Raggedpelt reared up on her back legs. With her filthy tail bristling, she looked even bigger.

Sandpaw sensed Raggedpelt's huge jaws lunging toward him. He leaned backward, just in time. *Snap!* Bared teeth close on the air next to his ear.

Instinctively Sandpaw lashed out with a back swipe. His paw caught the side of Raggedpelt's head. The force of it sent shock waves up his front leg.

"Yee-ow!" Stunned, Raggedpelt dropped onto four paws. She shook her head to clear it.

In the single heartbeat before the she-cat recovered, Sandpaw saw his chance. He threw himself forward, crouching low, and clamped his jaws tight on Raggedpelt's back leg. "Mur-ugh!" The taste of the matted fur was horrible, but he chomped down hard.

"Reow-ow-wow!" Raggedpelt screamed in agony and whipped around to snap at Sandpaw's tail.

Her teeth connected and pain lanced up Sandpaw's spine, but it only made him angrier. He ripped his tail from his opponent's grip, and lashed it back and forth in rage.

Raggedpelt crouched, ready for a fresh attack. Her breath seemed to wheeze up from her foul-smelling lungs. The scent blasted Sandpaw's nose. Up close, the message of desperation and weakness, and the aching void of the she-cat's hunger, was almost painful.

Something stirred inside him, an unwarriorlike feeling he didn't want: pity. He tried not to dwell on this instinct—he knew his loyalty must be to his Clan—but he couldn't shake free of it. "You speak from your heart, young Sandpaw." Frostfur's words echoed in his head once more. "This will make you a stronger warrior one day." The Goldenflower's warning rang in his ears: "Or it might make him give in to kittypet weakness right at the moment of

attack."

Raggedpelt lunged forward and Sandpaw jerked instantly back into aggression. The bigger cat tried to reach up onto his shoulders and get a killing grip, but this time she was hampered by her wounded leg.

"Gar-off!" Sandpaw arched his spine, but Raggedpelt managed to dig in her claws and hung on tight. The bigger cat's weight forced him to the ground.

Sandpaw tasted earth on his tongue and spat out a mouthful of grit. "Pah!"

He twisted nimbly to avoid Raggedpelt's thrashing back legs and the thorn-sharp claws that were trying to rake at his soft underbelly. Over and over they rolled, biting and snapping.

Moments later they broke apart. Sandpaw was gasping for breath now. But he sensed that Raggedpelt was weakening. The she-cat was badly wounded, and her back legs could barely support her scrawny body.

"Had enough yet?" Sandpaw growled. If the intruder gave way, he'd let her go with just a warning bite to remember him by.

"Never!" Raggedpelt hissed back bravely. But her injured leg gave way and she slumped to the ground. She tried to get up and failed. Her eyes were dull as she hissed up at Sandpaw, "If I weren't so hungry and tired, I'd have shredded you into mouse-dust." The she-cat's mouth twisted in pain and defiance. "Finish me off. I won't stop you."

Sandpaw hesitated. He'd never killed another cat before. Perhaps, in the heat of battle, he would, but a mercy killing, in cold blood? This was something very different.

'What are you waiting for?" Raggedpelt taunted. "You're dithering like a kittypet!"

Sandpaw smarted at the she-cat's words. Could she smell the scent of Twolegs on him, even now, after all this time?

"I'm an apprentice warrior of Thunderclan!" he snapped.

Raggedpelt narrowed her eyes. She'd seen Sandpaw flinch at her words and she knew she'd hit a nerve. "Ha," she snorted. "Don't tell me Thunderclan is so desperate they have to recruit kittypets now?"

"Thunderclan is not desperate!" hissed Sandpaw.

"Prove it then! Act like a warrior and finish me off. You'll be doing me a favor."

Sandpaw stared at her. He would not be goaded into killing this miserable creature. He felt his muscles relax as curiosity pricked him. How had a Clan cat gotten in such a state? Thunderclan elders were looked after better than kits! "You seem in an awful hurry to die," he meowed.

"Yeah? Well, that's my business, mouse-fodder," Raggedpelt snapped. "What's your problem, kitty? Are you trying to *talk* me to death?"

Her words were brave, but Sandpaw could smell the hunger and sickness that were coming off the other cat in waves. She was going to die anyway if she didn't eat soon. And since she could hardly hunt for herself, perhaps he should kill her now. The two cats look at each other, uncertainty in both their gazes.

"Wait here," Sandpaw ordered at last.

Raggedpelt seemed to deflate. Her hackles smoothed out and her tail lost its gorse-bush stiffness. "Are you kidding, kitty? I'm going nowhere." She grunted, limping painfully toward a patch of soft heather. She flopped down and began licking her leg wound.

Sandpaw glanced briefly over his shoulder at her and hissed quietly in exasperation before heading for the trees.

As he padded silently through the ferns, sun-warmed odors filled his nose, and he caught the sour reek of a long-dead rat. He heard the scratching of insects beneath bark, the rustle of furry things scurrying over leaves. His first thought had been to go and dig up the thrush he had killed earlier, but that would take too long.

Maybe he should go and scoop up the rat carcass. Easy meat, but a starving cat needed fresh-kill. Only when times were very hard would a warrior eat crow-food.

Just then he paused, scenting a young rabbit ahead. A few more steps and he saw it. Flattening himself down, he stalked the creature. He was barely a mouse-length away before it detected him. By then it was too late. The white bobtail darting away sent the thrill of the chase surging through Sandpaw's veins. A rush of speed, a flash of claws, and he had it.

He held the wriggling body fast and finished it off quickly.

Raggedpelt looked up tiredly as Sandpaw dropped the rabbit on the ground beside her. Her grizzled jaw dropped. "Well, hello again, kitty! I thought you'd gone to fetch your little warrior friends."

"Yeah? Well, I might still do that. And don't call me kitty." Sandpaw growled, shoving the rabbit nearer with his nose. He felt embarrassed by his kindness. "Look, if you don't want this..."

"Ah—no,_ Raggedpelt meowed hastily. "I do want it."

Sandpaw watched the she-cat rip open the prey and start to swallow it down. His own hunger rose up and his mouth filled with water. He knew he shouldn't even be *thinking* about eating. He still had to take back enough prey for the Clan, but the fresh-kill smelled delicious.

"Mmm-mm." A few minutes later, Raggedpelt gave a huge sigh and flopped onto her side. "First fresh-kill I've had for days." She licked her muzzle clean and settled down to give herself a thorough wash.

As if one wash is going to make much difference, Sand[aw thought, his nose twitching. She was the arch-cat of stench.

He eyed the tattered remnants of the prey. There wasn't much left to line a growing cat's belly, but his fight with Raggedpelt had sharpened his appetite even more; he gave in to his hunger and gulped down the scraps. It was delicious. He licked his lips, savoring every last taste, tingling from head to paw.

Raggedpelt watched him closely, showing her stained teeth. "Better than the much Twolegs feed some of our brothers, isn't it?" she mewed slyly. Knowing she had found his sore spot, she was trying to antagonize him.

Sandpaw ignored her and began to wash.

"It's poison," Raggedpelt went on. "Rat droppings! Only a spineless bag of fur would accept such disgusting frogspawn—" She broke off and tensed. "Shhh... warriors coming."

Sandpaw was also aware of cats approaching. He could hear their soft paw-fall on the leaf litter and the sound of fur swishing through branches. He smelled the wind brushing against their coats. Familiar smells. These were Thunderclan warriors, confident enough in their own territory not to care about the noise they made.

Sandpaw licked his lips guiltily, hoping to wash away any traces of the scraps he'd just swallowed. Then he looked at Raggedpelt and the fresh pile of rabbit bones that lay beside her. "The Clan must be fed *first*!" Frostfur's voice rang through his head once more. But surely he would understand why Sandpaw had fed this wretched creature. His mind reeled, suddenly fearful of what would happen to him. His first apprentice task, and he had ended up breaking the warrior code!

Chapter 8

Raggedpelt growled in defiance at the approaching pawsteps, but Sandpaw could sense her panic. The she-cat struggled to her feet. "So long. Thanks for the meal." She tried to limp away on three legs and then winced in pain. "Nuh! This leg's stiffened up while I've been resting."

Now it was too late for her to run. Silent shadows slipped out of the trees, and in a heartbeat the Thunderclan patrol had encircled Sandpaw and Raggedpelt. Sandpaw recognized them: Goldenflower, Darkstripe, Willowpelt, and Oakstar, all of them lean and hard-muscled. Sandpaw smelled Raggedpelt's fear at the sight of them.

Silverpaw followed close behind. He bounded out of the bushes and stood beside the warrior patrol.

Sandpaw mewed a hasty greeting to his Clan. But only Silverpaw returned it. "Hi, Sandpaw!" he called out.

"Silence!" Goldenflower growled.

Sandpaw glanced at Raggedpelt and groaned inwardly; he could still smell the fear-scent on her, but instead of cowering in submission, the scruffy creature was glaring in defiance.

"Sandpaw?" Oakstar's question was cool and measured. "What have we here? An enemy warrior—and recently fed, by the smell of you both." Her eyes burned into him, and Sandpaw dropped his head.

"She was weak and hungry..." he began.

"And what about you? Was your hunger so bad that you had to feed yourself before you had gathered prey for your Clan?" Oakstar went on. "I assume that you have a *very* good reason for breaking the warrior code?"

Sandpaw was not fooled by the leader's soft tone. Oakstar was furious—and rightly so. He crouched lower to the ground.

Before he could speak there was a loud hiss from Goldenflower. "Once a kittypet, always a kittypet!"

Oakstar ignored Goldenflower and looked instead at Raggedpelt. Suddenly she looked surprised. "Well, well, Sandpaw! It seems you have captured us a Shadowclan cat. And one I know well. You are Shadowclan's medicine cat, aren't you?" she meowed to Raggedpelt. "What are you doing so far into Thunderclan territory?"

"I *was* the Shadowclan medicine cat. Now I choose to travel alone," hissed Raggedpelt.

Sandpaw listened, astonished. Had he heard right? Raggedpelt was a Shadowclan warrior? Her filthy condition must have masked her territorial scent. He might have enjoyed tackling her more if he'd known.

"Raggedpelt!" Goldenflower meowed mockingly. "It looks like you have fallen on hard times if you can be beaten by an apprentice!"

Now Darkstripe spoke. "This old cat is no use to us. Let's kill her now. As for this *kittypet*, he has broken the warrior code by feeding an enemy warrior. He should be punished."

"Keep your claws in, Darkstripe," Oakstar purred calmly. "All the Clans speak of Raggedpelt's bravery and wisdom. It may help us to hear what she has to say. Come; we'll take her back to camp. Then we'll decide what to do with her—and with Sandpaw. Can you walk?" she asked Raggedpelt. "Or do you need help?"

"I've still got three good legs," the grizzled she-cat snapped back, limping forward.

Sandpaw saw that Raggedpelt's eyes were glazed with pain, but she seemed determined not to show any weakness. He noticed a look of respect flicker across Oakstar's face before the Thunderclan leader turned and slowly led the way through the trees. The other warriors took up positions on either side of Raggedpelt, and the patrol

moved off, carefully keeping pace with their lame prisoner.

Sandpaw and Silverpaw fell in step together at the back of the group.

"Have *you* heard of Raggedpelt?" Sandpaw hissed to Silverpaw.

"A bit. Apparently she was a warrior before she became a medicine cat, which is unusual. I can't imagine her as a *loner*, though. She has lived her whole life in Shadowclan."

"What's a loner?"

Silverpaw glanced at him. "A loner is a cat that isn't part of a Clan or cared for by Twolegs. Goldenflower says they are untrustworthy and selfish. They often live around Twoleg dwellings, but belong to no one and catch their own food."

"I might end up a loner once Oakstar has finished with me," Sandpaw mewed.

"Oakstar is very fair," Silverpaw reassured him. "She won't throw you out. She certainly seems pleased to have such an important Shadowclan cat as a prisoner. I'm sure she's not going to make a fuss about your feeding the poor old mange-bag."

"But they keep moaning about prey being scarce! Oh, why did I eat that rabbit?" Sandpaw felt shame burn through his fur.

"Well, yeah." Silverpaw nudged his friend. "That *was* mouse-brained. You really broke the warrior code there, but no cat is perfect!"

Sandpaw didn't answer but trekked onward with a heavy heart. This was not the way he had hoped his first solo task would end.

As the patrol passed the sentries who guarded the camp entrance, the rest of Thunderclan came running to welcome their warriors home.

Queens, kits, and elders crowded on either side. They peered curiously at Raggedpelt as she was led into the camp. Some of the elders recognized the old she-cat. Word spread quickly through the

Clan that this was Shadowclan's medicine cat, and a steady jeering hum rose up around them.

Raggedpelt seemed deaf to the taunts. Sandpaw couldn't help admiring the way she limped with dignity through the corridor of stares and insults. He knew she was in a great deal of pain. And hungry in spite of the rabbit he had caught for her.

When the patrol reached the Highrock, Oakstar nodded toward the dusty ground in front of it. Raggedpelt followed the Thunderclan leader's silent command, sinking gratefully onto the earth. Still ignoring the hostile stares around her, she began licking her wounded leg.

Sandpaw noticed Spottedleaf emerge from his corner. He must have scented the presence of an injured cat in the camp. He watched the crowd part to let the young tortoiseshell through.

Raggedpelt glared at Spottedleaf and hissed, "I know how to take care of my own wounds. I don't need your help."

Spottedleaf said nothing but nodded respectfully and stepped back.

Some of the cats had been out hunting, and fresh-kill was brought for the returning warriors to eat. They each took some food and carried it away to the nettle patch to eat it. Then the other Clan cats crowded forward to take their own share.

Sandpaw paced hungrily around the clearing and watched as cats crouched in their usual groups, chewing and gulping. He longed for a morsel, but didn't dare to take anything from the pile. He had broken the warrior code. He guessed that this meant he was forbidden his share in the fresh-kill.

He paused beside the Highrock where Oakstar was sharing words with Goldenflwoer. Uncertain, Sandpaw looked to his leader for a signal that he was allowed to eat. But the reddish-brown cat and her senior warrior were busy murmuring at one another in low tones. Sandpaw wondered if they were talking about him. Desperate to know his fate, he strained his ears to hear what they were saying.

Goldenflower's yowl sounded impatient. "It's just too dangerous to bring an enemy warrior into the heart of Thunderclan! Now that *she* knows the camp, even the youngest Shadowclan kit will hear of it. We will have to move."

"Calm down, Goldenflower," Oakstar purred. "Why should we move? Raggedpelt says that she is traveling alone now. There is no reason for Shadowclan to hear of it."

"Do you really believe that? What on earth was that foolish kittypet thinking of?" Goldenflower spat.

"But think for a moment, Goldenflower," mewed Oakstar. "Why would the Shadowclan medicine cat choose to leave her Clan? You seem to be afraid that Raggedpelt will share our Clan secrets with Shadowclan, but have you thought about how many Shadowclan secrets she might share with *us*?"

Sandpaw could see by the way Goldenflwoer's fur began to flatten that Oakstar's words made sense. The warrior nodded briefly, and then stalked off to take his share of the fresh-kill.

Oakstar remained where she was. She looked out across the clearing, where some of the younger kits were fighting and tumbling playfully in the dust. Then she stood up and began to walk toward Sandpaw. His heart lurched. What was she going to say to him?

But Oakstar walked straight past him. She did not even glance at him; her eyes were clouded with unknown distant thoughts. "Lionheart!" she called out as she approached the nursery.

A magnificent golden tabby cat with green eyes slipped out of the brambles. Inside, the noise of mewling grew louder.

"Hush, kits," purred the golden tabby cat reassuringly. "I won't be long." Then she turned to her leader. "Yes, Oakstar? What is it?"

"One of our apprentices has seen a fox in the area. Warn the other queens to guard the nursery carefully. And make sure all kits less than six moons stay inside the camp until our warriors have driven

it away."

Lionheart nodded. "I will pass on the warning, Oakstar. Thank you." Then she turned and squeezed back into the nursery to quiet the crying kits.

At last Oakstar strode over to the pile of fresh-kill and took her share. A plump wood pigeon had been left for her there. Sandpaw looked on longingly as she carried it away top eat with the senior warriors.

Finally his hunger drove him forward. Silverpaw was with Patchpaw, wolfing down a small finch beside the tree stump. He saw Sandpaw approach the pile and flicked his head encouragingly. Sandpaw bent his neck, ready to take a small wood mouse in his teeth.

"Not for you," Goldenflower growled, striding up behind him and pawing the mouse away. "You didn't bring back any prey. The elders will eat your share. Take it to them."

Sandpaw looked over to Oakstar.

She nodded shortly. "Do as he says."

Obediently, Sandpaw picked up the mouse and carried it across to Speckletail. The delicious smell of it wafted up Sandpaw's nose. He wanted nothing more than to crunch it up with his strong teeth. He could almost feel its life energy flooding his young body.

With great self-control, he laid the prey down in front of the pale tabby tom and then backed away politely. He expected no thanks and was offered none.

Now he was glad that he had gobbled up the remains of the rabbit he had caught for Raggedpelt. There would be nothing else for him to eat until he went out hunting again tomorrow.

Sandpaw wandered over to Silverpaw. His friend had eaten his fill and lay with Patchpaw outside the apprentices' den. He was stretched out on his side, rhythmically washing a foreleg.

Silverpaw saw Sandpaw approach, and paused in his licking. "Has Oakstar mentioned your punishment yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," Sandpaw replied gloomily.

Silverpaw narrowed his eyes sympathetically and said nothing.

Oakstar's call sounded across the clearing. "Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey join together for a meeting of our Clan."

Most of the warriors had finished eating and, like Silverpaw, were busy grooming themselves. They lifted themselves gracefully to their paws and walked over to the Highrock, where Oakstar waited to speak.

"Come on," mewed Silverpaw. He leaped up. Patchpaw and Sandpaw followed him as he scampered over and nudged his way forward into a good position.

"I'm sure you have all heard about the prisoner we brought back with us today," Oakstar began. "But there is something else you need to know." She glanced down at the raddled she-cat who lay very still beside the Highrock. "Can you hear me from there?" she asked.

"I may be old, but I'm not deaf yet!" Raggedpelt spat in reply.

Oakstar ignored the prisoner's hostile tone and continued. "I'm afraid I have some very grave news. Today I traveled with a patrol into Windclan territory. The air was filled with the scent of Shadowclan. Almost every tree had been sprayed by Shadowclan warriors. And we met no Windclan cats even though we journeyed deep into their heartland."

Her words were met with silence. Sandpaw saw confusion in the faces of the Clan cats.

"Do you mean Shadowclan has chased them out?" called Speckletail hesitantly.

"We can't be sure," Oakstar meowed. "Certainly the scent of

Shadowclan was everywhere. We found blood, too, and fur. There must have been a battle, though we found no bodies from either Clan."

A shocked yowl rose from the crowd in a single voice. Sandpaw felt the cats around him stiffen with shock and fury. Never before had one Clan driven another from its hunting grounds.

"How can Windclan have been driven out?" Halftail croaked hoarsely. "Shadowclan is fierce, but Windclan is many. They have lived in the uplands for generations. Why have they been chased out now?" She shook her head anxiously, her whiskers trembling.

"I don't know the answers to any of your questions," meowed Oakstar. "It is well known that Shadowclan has recently appointed a new leader, following the death of Yellowstar. Their new leader, Brokenstar, gave no hint of any threat when we met her at the last Gathering."

"Perhaps Raggedpelt has answers?" snarled Darkstripe. "After all, she is of Shadowclan!"

"I am no traitor! Nothing would make me share the secrets of Shadowclan with a brute like you!" growled Raggedpelt, glaring aggressively at Darkstripe. The Thunderclan warrior moved forward, ears flat, eyes closed to slits, ready for a fight.

"Stop!" yowled Oakstar.

Darkstripe immediately halted in her tracks, even though Raggedpelt goaded her on with blazing eyes and a ferocious hiss.

"That's enough!" Oakstar growled. "This situation is too serious for us to be fighting among ourselves. Thunderclan must prepare itself. From this moonrise onward, warriors will travel in larger groups. Other Clan members will remain close to the camp. Patrols will travel the boundary edges more frequently, and all the kits must stay in the nursery."

The cats below her nodded in agreement.

Oakstar continued. "Our need for warriors is our greatest obstacle.

We shall get around this by speeding up the training of our apprentices. They need to be ready even sooner to fight for our Clan."

Sandpaw saw Fernpaw and Firepaw exchange a thrilled glance. Silverpaw was gazing up at Oakstar, his eyes wide with excitement. Patchpaw just shuffled her paws anxiously. The black-and-white apprentice's wide eyes showed worry rather than excitement.

Oakstar went on. "One young cat has been sharing mentors with Silverpaw and Patchpaw. By teaching him, I shall speed up the training of all three apprentices." She paused and looked down at her Clan. "I shall take on Sandpaw as my own apprentice."

Sandpaw opened his eyes wide in amazement. Oakstar was to be his mentor?

Beside him, Silverpaw gasped, unable to hide his surprise. "What an honor! It's been *moons* since Oakstar had an apprentice. Usually she trains only the kits of deputies!"

Then a familiar voice rose from the front of the crowd. It was Goldenflower. "So Sandpaw is to be rewarded, not punished, for feeding an enemy warrior when he should have been feeding his own Clan?"

"Sandpaw is my apprentice now. I will deal with him," answered Oakstar. She stared into Goldenflower's fierce eyes for a moment before lifting her head to address the whole Clan once more. "Raggedpelt will be allowed to stay here until she has recovered her strength. We are warriors, not savages. She is to be treated with respect and courtesy."

"But the Clan cannot support Raggedpelt," Darkstripe protested. "We have too many mouths to feed already."

"Yeah!" Silverpaw whispered into Sandpaw's ear. "And some of them are bigger than others!"

"I don't need anyone to care for me!" spat Raggedpelt. "And I'll split open anyone who tries!"

"Friendly, isn't she?" Silverpaw murmured.

Sandpaw flicked the tip of his tail in silent agreement. There were muffled meows from the other warriors as they grudgingly recognized the enemy warrior's fighting spirit.

Oakstar ignored the murmuring. "We shall kill two prey with one blow, as it were. Sandpaw, as punishment for breaking the warrior code, it will be your responsibility to care for Raggedpelt. You will hunt for her and tend her wounds. You will fetch fresh bedding and clear away her dirt."

"Yes, Oakstar," mewed Sandpaw, his head bowed in submission. *Clear away her dirt!* He thought to himself. *Ugh!*

Mocking yowls came from Fernpaw and Firepaw. "Good idea!" hissed Fernpaw. "Sandpaw had better be good at cracking fleas!"

"And hunting!" added Firepaw. "That sack of bones is going to need feeding up!"

"Enough!" Oakstar interrupted them. "I hope Sandpaw will find no shame in caring for Raggedpelt. She is a healer, and she is his elder. For those reasons alone he should respect her!" She shot a sharp glance at Firepaw and Fernpaw. "And there is no humiliation in caring for another cat when she is unable to take care of herself. The meeting is over. I would like to speak to my senior warriors alone now." With that, she jumped down from the Highrock and marched toward her den.

Frostfur followed her. The other Clan cats began to move away from the Highrock. One or two congratulated Sandpaw on being chosen as Oakstar's apprentice; others mockingly wished him luck looking after Raggedpelt. Sandpaw felt so dazed by Oakstar's announcement that he just nodded blankly.

Longtail padded up to him. The vee-shaped nick that Sandpaw had cut into the tip of his ear still showed. The young warrior drew back her whiskers into an ugly snarl. "Well, I hope you'll think twice about bringing strays back into the camp next time," she sneered. "Like I said, outsiders *always* bring trouble."

Chapter 9

"I'd go and see Raggedpelt, if I were you," whispered Silverpaw, as Longtail strode away. "She doesn't look very happy."

Sandpaw glanced over at the old she-cat. She was still lying beside the Highrock. Silverpaw was right; she was glaring at him.

"Well, here goes," he mewed. "Wish me luck!"

"You'll need the whole of Starclan on your side for this one," answered Silverpaw. "Call out if you need a paw. If she looks like she's going to get you, I'll sneak up behind her and whack her on the head with a stiff rabbit."

Sandpaw purred with amusement and trotted off toward Raggedpelt. His cheerfulness quickly evaporated as he neared the injured queen.

The old cat was clearly in a terrible mood. She hissed a warning and showed her teeth. "Stop right there, *kittypet*!"

Sandpaw sighed. It seemed he was in for a fight. He was still hungry and beginning to feel tired. He longed to curl up in his nest for an afternoon nap. The last thing he wanted was to argue with this pitiful clump of fur and teeth. "You can call me what you like," he mewed wearily. "I'm just following Oakstar's orders."

"You *are* a kittypet, though, aren't you?" Raggedpelt wheezed.

She's tired too, Sandpaw thought. There was less fire in her voice, although her spite was as strong as ever.

"I used to live with Twolegs when I was a kitten," Sandpaw replied calmly.

"Your mother a kittypet? Your father a kittypet?"

"Yes, they were." Sandpaw looked down at the ground, feeling resentment burn inside him. It was bad enough that members of his own Clan still viewed him as an outsider. H certainly didn't have to answer to this foul-tempered prisoner.

Raggedpelt seemed to take his silence as an invitation to go on. "Kittypet blood is not the same as warrior blood. Why don't you run home to your Twolegs now instead of looking after me? It's humiliating, being fussed over by a lowborn cat like *you*!"

Sandpaw's patience ran out. He snarled, "You'd still feel humiliated if I *were* warrior-born. You'd feel ashamed whether I was a precious she-cat from your own Clan or a wretched Twoleg that had picked you off the ground." He lashed his tail from side to side. "It's the fact that you need to rely on *any* cat that you find so humiliating!"

Raggedpelt stared at him, her amber eyes very wide.

Sandpaw carried on fiercely: "You're just going to have to get used to being cared for until you are well enough to look after yourself, you spiteful old bone bag!"

He stopped as Raggedpelt began to make a low, harsh wheezing sound.

Alarmed, Sandpaw took a step toward her. The she-cat was trembling all over and her eyes had narrowed into tiny slits. Was she having some kind of a fit?

"Look, I didn't mean..." he began, before he suddenly realized that she was *laughing*!

"Mr-ow, ow-ow," she mewled, a purr rumbling up from deep inside her chest.

Sandpaw didn't know what to do.

"You have spirit, kittypet," Raggedpelt croaked, stopping at last. "Now, I'm tired and my legs hurt. I need sleep and something to put on this wound. Go and find that handsome little medicine cat of yours and ask him for some herbs. I think you'll find a goldenrod poultice would help. And, while you're at it, I wouldn't mind a few poppy seeds to chew on. The pain is killing me!"

Stunned by her change of mood, Sandpaw turned quickly and sprinted toward Spottedleaf's den.

He had never been in this part of the camp before. With his ears pricked, he padded through a cool green tunnel of ferns that led into a small grassy clearing. A tall rock stood at one side, split down the middle by a crack wide enough for a cat to make its den inside. Out of this opening trotted Spottedleaf. As usual, he looked bright-eyed and friendly, his dappled coat gleaming with a hundred shades of amber and brown.

Sandpaw shyly mewed a greeting, and reeled off Raggedpelt's list of herbs and seeds.

"I've got most of those in my den," replied Spottedleaf. "I'll fetch some marigold leaves too. If she dresses her wound with that, it'll keep off any infection. Wait here."

"Thanks," Sandpaw mewed as the medicine cat disappeared back into his den. He strained his eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of him inside. But the den was too dark to see anything; he could only hear the sound of rustling and smell the heady scent of unfamiliar herbs.

Spottedleaf emerged from the gloom and dropped a bundle of folded leaves by Sandpaw's feet. "Tell Raggedpelt to go easy on the poppy seeds. I don't want her to deaden the pain entirely. A little pain can be useful, as it will help me judge how well she is healing."

Sandpaw nodded and picked up the herbs with his teeth. "Thanks, Spottedleaf!" he mewed through the mouthful of leaves, then headed back through the fern tunnel into the main clearing.

Goldenflower was sitting outside the warrior's den, watching him closely. As Sandpaw trotted over to Raggedpelt, carrying the herbs, he could feel the yellow-eyed stare burning the fur on the back of his neck. He turned his head and looked at Goldenflower curiously. The warrior narrowed his eyes and looked away.

Sandpaw dropped the bundle beside Raggedpelt.

"Good," she meowed. "Now, before you leave me in peace, find me something to eat. I'm starving!"

The sun had risen three times since Raggedpelt had entered the camp. Sandpaw woke early and nudged Silverpaw, who was still asleep beside him, his nose tucked under his thick tail.

"Wake up," Sandpaw mewed. "Or you'll be late for training."

Silverpaw lifted his head sleepily and growled in reluctant agreement.

Sandpaw prodded Patchpaw.

The black-and-white cat opened her eyes immediately and leaped to her feet. "What is it?" she mewed, looking around wildly.

"Calm down, Patchpaw. It's time for training soon." Sandpaw soothed.

Fernpaw and Firepaw began to stir too, in their mossy nests on the far side of the den. Sandpaw stood up and pushed his way out of the ferns.

The morning was warm. Sandpaw could see a deep blue sky through the leaves and branches that overhung the camp. Today, however, a heavy dew glistened on the fern fronds and sparkled on the grass. Sandpaw sniffed the air. Greenleaf was drawing to a close, and soon it would start to feel colder.

He lay down and rolled in the earth beside the tree stump, stretching his legs and tipping his head back to rub it on the cool ground. Then he flipped over onto his side, and looked across the clearing to see if Raggedpelt was awake yet.

She had been given a resting place at the other end of the fallen tree where the elders gathered to eat. Her nest lay tucked against its mossy trunk, out of hearing of the elders. But in full view of the warriors' den across the clearing. Sandpaw could just see a mound of dark brown tabby fur, rising and falling in time to a gentle rumble of sleep.

Silverpaw trotted out of the den behind him, followed by Firepaw and Fernpaw. Patchpaw appeared last, with a nervous glance around the clearing before she emerged fully into the open.

"Another day looking after that mangy old fleabag, eh, Sandpaw?" mewed Fernpaw. "I bet you wish you were out training with us."

Sandpaw sat up and shook the dust from his fur. He wasn't going to let himself get annoyed by Fernpaw's taunts.

"Don't worry, Sandpaw," murmured Siverpaw. "Oakstar will have you back in training before long."

"Perhaps she thinks a kittypet is better off staying in camp, tending to the sick." mewed Firepaw rudely, tossing her sleek flame colored head and throwing him a scornful look.

Sandpaw decided to ignore her barbed comments. "What is Brindleface teaching you today, Firepaw?" he mewed.

"We're doing battle training today. He's going to teach me how a real warrior fights," Firepaw replied proudly.

"Frostfur's taking me to the Great Sycamore," mewed Silverpaw, "to practice my climbing. I'd best go. He'll be waiting."

"I'll come with you to the top of the ravine," mewed Sandpaw. "I have to catch breakfast for Raggedpelt. Coming, Patchpaw? Goldenflower must have something planned for you."

Patchpaw sighed and nodded, then followed Silverpaw and Sandpaw as they trotted out of the camp. Even though her injury was completely healed, she still seemed to have little enthusiasm for warrior training.

"Here," mewed Sandpaw. He dropped a large mouse and a chaffinch onto the ground beside Raggedpelt.

"About time." she growled. The she-cat had still been sleeping when Sandpaw had entered the camp after his hunting trip. But the smell of fresh-kill must have woken her, for now she had pulled herself into a sitting position.

She dropped her head and hungrily gulped down Sandpaw's offerings. She had developed a massive appetite as her strength returned. Her wound was healing well, but her temper remained as fierce and unpredictable as ever.

She finished her meal and complained, "The base of my tail itches like fury, but I can't reach it. Give it a wash, will you?"

With an inward shudder, Sandpaw crouched down and set to work.

As he cracked the plump fleas between his teeth, he noticed a gang of small kits tumbling in the dusty earth nearby. They were mauling each other and play-fighting, sometimes quite viciously. Raggedpelt, who had closed her eyes as Sandpaw groomed her, half opened one eye to observe the kits as they played. To his surprise, Sandpaw felt her spine stiffen beneath his teeth.

He listened for a moment to the tiny yelps and squeaks of the kits.

"Feel my teeth, Brokenstar!" mewed one small tabby. She leaped onto the back of a little gray-and-white kit, who was pretending to be the Shadowclan leader. The two kits bundled toward the Highrock. Suddenly the gray-and-white kit gave a mighty heave and flung the tabby from her back. With a startled squeak, the little tabby cannoned into Raggedpelt's side.

Instantly the old she-cat leaped to her feet, fur on end, spitting violently. "Stay away from me, you scrap of fur!" she hissed.

The tabby kit took one look at the furious cat, turned tail, and ran. She hid herself behind a tabby tom, who was staring furiously across the clearing at Raggedpelt.

The gray-and-white kit froze where she stood. Then, paw by paw,

she cautiously backed away toward the safety of the nursery.

Raggedpelt's reaction had shocked Sandpaw. He thought he'd seen her at her most vicious when they fought after their first meeting, but her eyes burned with a new rage now. "I think the kits are finding it hard being confined to camp," he mewed cautiously. "They're getting restless."

"I don't care how restless they are," growled Raggedpelt. "Just keep them away from me!"

"Don't you like kits?" Sandpaw asked, curious in spite of himself. "Did you never have kits of your own?"

"Don't you know medicine cats don't have kits?" hissed Raggedpelt furiously.

"But I heard you were a warrior before that," Sandpaw ventured.

"I have no kits!" Raggedpelt spat. She snatched her tail away from him and sat up. "Anyway"—her voice suddenly lowered, and she sounded almost wistful—"accidents seem to happen to kits when I'm around them."

Her amber eyes clouded with emotion. She lad her chin flat on her forepaws and stared ahead. Sandpaw watched her shoulders sink as she released a long, silent sigh.

Sandpaw looked at her curiously. What could she mean? Was the old she-cat being serious? It was hard to tell; Raggedpelt seemed to swing from mood to mood so quickly. He shrugged to himself and went on with the grooming.

"There are a couple of ticks I couldn't pull out," he told her when he had finished.

"I should hope you didn't even try, you idiot!" snapped Raggedpelt. "I don;t want any tick heads embedded in my rear, thank you very much. Ask Spottedleaf for a little mouse bile to rub on them. A splash of that in their breathing holed and they'll soon loosen their grip."

"I'll get some now!" Sandpaw offered. He was glad of a chance to get away from the grumpy cat for a while. And it was certainly no hardship to go and see Spottedleaf again.

He walked toward the fern tunnel. Cats crossed the clearing around him, carrying sticks and twigs in their teeth. While he had been grooming Raggedpelt, the camp had grown active. It had been like this every day since Oakstar had announced Windclan's disappearance. The queens were weaving twigs and leaves into a dense green wall around the sides of the nursery, making sure that the narrow entrance was the only way in and out of the bramble patch. Other cats were working at the edges of the camp, filling in any spaces in the thick undergrowth.

Even the elders were busy, scraping out a hole in the ground. Warriors filed steadily past, piling pieces of fresh-kill beside them, ready to be stored inside the newly dug hole. There was an air of quiet concentration, a determination to make the Clan as secure and well supplied as possible.

If Shadowclan made a move on their territory, Thunderclan would shelter inside the camp. They would not let themselves be driven from their hunting grounds as easily as Windclan had been.

Darkstripe, Longtail, Willowpelt, and Fernpaw were waiting silently at the camp entrance. Their eyes were fixed on the opening to the gorse tunnel. A patrol was just returning, dusty and paw-sore. As soon as the warriors entered the camp. Darkstripe and her companions approached and exchanged words with them. Then they slipped quickly out of the camp. Thunderclan's borders were not being left unguarded for a moment.

Sandpaw headed down the fern tunnel that led to Spottedleaf's den. As he entered the clearing, he could see Spottedleaf was preparing some sweet-smelling herbs.

"Can I have some mouse bile for Raggedpelt's ticks?" Sandpaw mewed.

"In a moment," replied Spottedleaf, pawing two piles of herbs together and mixing the fragrant heap with one delicately extended

claw.

"Busy?" Sandpaw asked, settling down on a warm patch of earth.

"I want to be prepared for any casualties," Spottedleaf murmured, glancing up at him with his clear amber eyes. Sandpaw met his gaze for a moment, then looked away, an uncomfortable feeling prickling his fur. Spottedleaf turned his attention back to the herbs.

Sandpaw waited, happy to sit quietly and watch him at work.

"Right," he mewed at last. "What was it you wanted? Mouse bile?"

"Yes, please." Sandpaw stood up and stretched each back leg in turn. The sun had warmed his fur and made him feel sleepy.

Spottedleaf bounded into his den and brought something out. He held it gingerly in his mouth. It was a small wad of moss dangling on the end of a thin strip of bark. He passed it to Sandpaw. He tasted his warm, sweet breath as he took the bark strip between his teeth.

"The moss is soaked in bile," Spottedleaf explained. "Don't get any in your mouth, or you'll have a foul taste for days. Press it onto the ticks and then wash your paws—in a stream, not with your tongue!"

Sandpaw nodded and trotted back to Raggedpelt, feeling suddenly cheerful and tingling with energy.

"Hold still!" he mewed to the old she-cat. Carefully he used his forepaws to press the moss onto each tick.

"You may as well clear away my dirt now your paws are already foul!" she meowed when he had finished. "I'm going to take a nap." She yawned, revealing her blackened and broken teeth. The warmth of the day was making her sleepy, too. "Then you can go and do whatever it is you apprentices do," she murmured.

When Sandpaw had cleared away Raggedpelt's dirt, he left her dozing and made his way to the gorse tunnel. He was keen to get to the stream and rinse his paws.

"Sandpaw!" a voice called from the side of the clearing.

Sandpaw turned. It was One-Eye.

"Where are you off to?" meowed the old cat curiously. "You ought to be helping with the preparations."

"I've just been putting mouse bile on Raggedpelt's ticks," replied Sandpaw.

Amusement flickered through One-Eye's whiskers. "So now you're off to the nearest stream! Well, don't come back without fresh-kill. We need as much as we can find."

"Yes, One-Eye," Sandpaw replied.

He made his way out of the camp and up the side of the ravine. He trotted down to the stream where he and Silverpaw had hunted on the day he had found Raggedpelt. Without hesitating he jumped down into the cold, clear water. It came up to his haunches, and wet his belly fur. The shock made him gasp, and he shivered.

A rustle in the bushes above him made him look up, although the familiar scent that reached his nose told him there was nothing to be alarmed about.

"What are you doing in there?" Silverpaw and Patchpaw were standing looking at him as if he were mad.

"Mouse bile." Sandpaw grimaced. "Don't ask! Where are Frostfur and Goldenflower?"

"They've gone to join the next patrol," answered Silverpaw. "They ordered us to spend the rest of the afternoon hunting."

"One-Eye told me the same thing," Sandpaw mewed, flinching as a chilly current of water rushed around his paws. "Everyone's busy back at camp. You'd think we were about to be attacked at any moment." He climbed up onto the bank, dripping.

"Who says we won't be?" mewed Patchpaw, her eyes flicking from side to side as if she expected an enemy patrol to leap out of the

bushes at any time.

Sandpaw looked at the heap of fresh-kill that was piled beside the two apprentices. "Looks like you've done all right today," he mewed.

"Yeah," mewed Silverpaw proudly. "And we've still got the rest of the afternoon to hunt. Do you want to join us?"

"You bet!" Sandpaw purred. He gave himself a final shake, then bounded into the undergrowth after his friends.

Sandpaw could tell that the cats back at camp were impressed with the amount of prey the three apprentices had managed to catch during their afternoon hunt. They were welcomed back with high tails and friendly nuzzles. It took them four journeys to carry their bumper catch to the storage hole the elders had dug.

Frostfur and Goldenflower had just returned with their patrol as Sandpaw, Silverpaw, and Patchpaw carried their last load into the camp.

"Well done, you three," meowed Frostfur. "I hear you've been busy. The store is almost full. You might as well add that last lot to the pile of fresh-kill for tonight. And take some of it back to your den with you. You deserve a feast!"

The three apprentices flicked their tails with delight.

"I hope you've not been neglecting Raggedpelt with all this hunting, Sandpaw," Goldenflower growled warningly.

Sandpaw shook his head impatiently, eager to get away. He was starving. He had obeyed the warrior code this time and not eaten a morsel while he was hunting for the Clan. Nor had Silverpaw or Patchpaw.

They trotted away and dropped the last of their catch on the fresh-kill that already lay at the center of the clearing. Then each of them took a piece and carried it back to their tree stump. The den was empty.

"Where are Fernpaw and Firepaw?" asked Patchpaw.

"They must still be out on patrol," Sandpaw guessed.

"Good," meowed Silverpaw. "Peace and quiet."

They ate their fill and lay back to wash. The cool evening air was welcome after the heat of the day.

"Hey! Guess what!" mewed Silverpaw suddenly. "Patchpaw managed to squeeze a compliment out of old Goldenflower this morning!"

"Really?" Sandaw gasped. "What on earth did you do to please Goldenflower—fly?"

"Well," Patchpaw began shyly, looking at her paws, "I caught a crow."

"How'd you manage that?" Sandpaw mewed, impressed.

"It was an old one," Patchpaw admitted modestly.

"But it was huge," added Silverpaw. "Even Goldenflower couldn't find fault with that! He's been in such a bad mood since Bluestar took you on as her apprentice." He licked his paw thoughtfully for a moment. "Hang on, make that since Frostfur was made deputy."

"He's just worried about Shadowclan, and the extra patrols," mewed Patchpaw hastily. "You should try not to annoy him."

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud yowl from the other side of the clearing.

"Oh, no." Sandpaw groaned, getting to his paws. "I forgot to take Raggedpelt her share!"

"You wait here," mewed Silverpaw, leaping up. "I'll take her something."

"No, I'd better go," Sandpaw protested. "This is my punishment, not yours."

"No one will notice," argued Silverpaw. "They're all busy eating. You

know me: quiet as a mouse, quick as a fish. Wait here."

Sandpaw sat down again, unable to hide his relief. He watched his friend trot away from the tree stump to the pile of fresh-kill.

As if he were carrying out orders, Silverpaw confidently picked out two of the juiciest-looking mice. Quickly, he began to pad across the clearing toward Raggedpelt.

"Stop, Silverpaw!" A loud growl rumbled from the entrance to the warrior's den. Goldenflower strode out and marched over to Silverpaw. "Where are you taking those mice?" he demanded.

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Sandpaw watched, helpless, from the tree stump. Beside him, Patchpaw froze midchew and crouched over her meal with her eyes wider than ever.

"Umm..." Silverpaw dropped the mice and shuffled his paws uncomfortably.

"Not helping young Sandpaw by feeding that greedy traitor over there, are you?"

Sandpaw watched Silverpaw study his paws for a moment. Finally he replied, "I, er, I was just feeling hungry. I was going to take them off and eat them by myself. If I let that pair get a look in"—he glanced at Sandpaw and Patchpaw—"they'll leave me with nothing but bones and fur."

"Oh, *really?*" mewed Goldenflower. "Well, if you're so hungry, you might as well eat them here and now!"

"But—" Silverpaw began, looking up at the senior warrior in alarm.

"Now!" growled Goldenflower.

Silverpaw bent his head quickly and began to eat the mice. He demolished the first one in a couple of bites and swallowed it quickly. The second mouse took longer for him to eat. Sandpaw thought he'd never manage to swallow it, and his own stomach clenched in sympathy, but eventually Siverpaw gave a final, difficult gulp and the last bit of mouse disappeared.

"Better now?" asked Goldenflower, his voice smooth with mock sympathy.

"Much," replied Silverpaw, stifling a burp.

"Good." Goldenflower stalked off again, back to his den.

Silverpaw slunk uncomfortably back to Sandpaw and Patchpaw.

"Thanks, Silverpaw," Sandpaw mewed grateful, nudging his fiend's soft fur. "That was quick thinking."

The noise of Raggedpelt's yowl rose into the air once more. Sandpaw sighed and got to his paws. He would make sure he took her enough to see her through the night. He wanted to turn in early. His stomach was full and his paws were tired.

"Are you okay, Silverpaw?" he asked as he turned to leave.

"Mrr-ow-ow," moaned Silverpaw. He was hunched into a low crouch, squirting with pain. "I've eaten too much!"

"Go and see Spottedleaf," Sandpaw suggested. "I'm sure he'll find something to help."

"I hope so," mewed Silverpaw, tottering slowly away.

Sandpaw wanted to watch him go, until another angry yow from Raggedpelt sent him sprinting across the clearing.

Chapter 10

By the following morning, a thin drizzle soaked the treetops and dripped down into the camp.

Sandpaw woke up feeling damp. It had been an uncomfortable night. He stood up and shook himself vigorously, fluffing out his fur. Then he left the apprentices' den and trotted across the clearing to Raggedpelt's nest.

Raggedpelt was just stirring. She lifted her head and squinted at Sandpaw as he approached. "My bones ache this morning. Has it been raining all night?"

"Since just after moonhigh," Sandpaw replied. He reached out and prodded her mossy nest cautiously. "Your bedding is soaking wet. Why don't you move nearer to the nursery? It's more sheltered there."

"What? And be kept awake all night by those mewling kits! I'd rather get wet!" Raggedpelt growled.

Sandpaw watched her circle stiffly on her mossy bed. "Then at least let me fetch you some dry bedding," he offered, keen to drop the subject of kits if it upset the old she-cat so much.

"Thank you, Sandpaw," replied Raggedpelt quietly, settling down again.

Sandpaw felt stunned. He wondered if Raggedpelt was feeling all right. It was the first time she had thanked him for anything, and the first time she had not called him *kittypet*.

"Well, don't just stand there like a startled squirrel; go and fetch some moss!" she snapped.

Sandpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement. This was more like

the Raggedpelt he was used to. He nodded and sprinted off.

He almost crashed into Smallear in the middle of the clearing. This was the queen who had watched Raggedpelt's angry outburst at the tabby kit the day before.

"Sorry, Smallear," Sandpaw mewed. "Are you on your way to see Raggedpelt?"

"What would I want with *that* unnatural creature?" replied Smallear crossly. "Actually it's you I was looking for. Oakstar wants to see you."

Sandpaw hurried toward the Highrock and Oakstar's den.

Oakstar was sitting outside, her head bobbing rhythmically as she licked the reddish-brown fur below her throat. She paused when she noticed Sandpaw. "How is Raggedpelt today?" she meowed.

"Her bedding is wet, so I was going to fetch her more," Sandpaw replied.

"I'll ask one of the queens to see to that." Oakstar gave her chest another lick, and then eyed Sandpaw carefully. "Is she fit enough to hunt for herself yet?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Sandpaw meowed, "but she can walk well enough now."

"I see," meowed Oakstar. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "It is time for you to return to your training, Sandpaw. But you'll need to work hard to make up for the time you have lost."

"Great! I mean, thank you, Oakstar!" Sandpaw stammered.

"You will go out with Goldenflower, Silverpaw, and Patchpaw this morning," Oakstar continued. "I've asked Goldenflower to assess the warrior skills of all our apprentices. Don't worry about Raggedpelt; I'll make sure someone sees to her while you are gone."

Sandpaw nodded.

"Now, join your companions," Oakstar ordered. "I expect they're waiting for you."

"Thank you, Oakstar," Sandpaw mewed. He turned with a flick of his tail and darted toward his den.

Oakstar was right; Silverpaw and Patchpaw were both waiting for him by their favorite tree stump. Silverpaw looked stiff and uncomfortable, his long fur clumped by the dampness of the air. Patchpaw was pacing around the tree stump, lost in thought, the tip of her tail twitching.

"So, you're joining us today!" Silverpaw called as Sandpaw approached. "Some day, huh?" He shook himself roughly to get rid of the clinging wetness.

"Yes. Oakstar told me that Goldenflower is going to assess us today. Are Firepaw and Fernpaw coming too?"

"Brindleface and Darkstripe took them out on warrior patrol. I suppose Goldenflower is going to look at them later," Silverpaw answered.

"Come on! We should get going," urged Patchpaw. She had stopped pacing and now hovered beside them anxiously.

"Fine by me," mewed Silverpaw. "Hopefully some exercise will warm me up a bit!"

The three cats trotted through the gorse track and out of the camp. They hurried to the sandy hollow. Goldenflower had not arrived, so they hung around in the shelter of a pine tree, their fur fluffed up against the chill.

"Are you worried about the assessment?" Sandpaw asked Patchpaw, as the young cat padded backward and forward with quick, nervous pawsteps. "There's no need to be. You're Goldenflower's apprentice, after all. When he reports back to Oakstar, he's going to want to tell her how good you are."

"You can never tell with Goldenflower," mewed Patchpaw, still pacing.

"For goodness' sake, sit down," Silverpaw grumbled. "At this rate you'll be worn out before we begin!"

By the time Goldenflower arrived, the sky had changed. The clouds looked less like thick gray fur, and more like the soft white calls of down the queens used to line the nests of their newborns. Blue skies couldn't be far behind, but the breeze that brought the softer clouds carried a fresh chill.

Goldenflower greeted them briskly and launched straight into the exercise details. "Frostfur and I have spent the last few weeks trying to teach you how to hunt decently," he meowed. "Today you'll have a chance to show me how much you have learned. Each of you will take a different route and hunt as much prey as possible. And whatever you catch will be added to the supplies in the camp."

The three apprentices looked at one another, nervous and excited. Sandpaw felt his heart begin to beat faster at the prospect of a challenge.

"Patchpaw, you will follow the trail beyond the Great Sycomore as far as the Snakerocks. That should be easy enough for your pitiful skills. You, Silverpaw," Goldenflower continued, "will take the route along the stream, as far as the Thunderpath."

"Great," mewed Silverpaw. "Wet paws for me!" Goldenflower's stare silenced him.

"And finally you, Sandpaw. What a shame your great mentor couldn't be here today to witness your performance for herself. You shall take the route through the Tallpines, past the Treecut place, to the woods beyond."

Sandpaw nodded, frantically tracing the route in his head.

"And remember," Goldenflower finished, fixing them all with his pale-eyed stare, "I will be watching all of you."

Patchpaw was the first to sprint away toward the Snakerocks. Goldenflower took a different track into the woods, leaving Silverpaw and Sandpaw alone in the hollow, trying to guess who

Goldenflower would follow first.

"I don't know why he thinks Snakerocks is an easy route!" mewed Silverpaw. "The place is crawling with adders. Birds and mice stay away from there because there are so many snakes!"

"Patchpaw'll have to spend her whole time trying not to get bitten," Sandpaw agreed.

"Oh, she'll be okay," mewed Silverpaw. "Not even an adder would be fast enough to catch Patchpaw at the moment, she's so jumpy. I'd better get going. See you back here later on. Good luck!"

Silverpaw raced off toward the stream. Sandpaw paused to sniff the air, then bounded up the side of the hollow and began to head for the Tallpines.

It felt strange to be going in this direction, toward the Twoleg place he had been raised in. Cautiously Sandpaw crossed the narrow path into the pine forest. He looked through the straight rows of trees, across the flat forest floor, alert for the sight and scent of prey.

A movement caught his eye. It was a mouse, scrabbling through the pine needles. Remembering his first lesson, Sandpaw dropped into the stalking position, keeping his weight in his haunches, his paws light on the ground. The technique worked perfectly. The mouse didn't detect Sandpaw until his final leap. He caught it with one paw and killed it swiftly. Then he buried it, so that he could pick it up on his return journey.

Sandpaw traveled a little farther into the Tallpines. The ground here was deeply rutted by the tracks of the huge Twoleg monster that tore down the trees. Sandpaw took a deep breath, his mouth open. The monster's acid breath had not touched the air here for a while.

Sandpaw followed the deep tracks, jumping across the ruts. They were half-filled with rain, which made him feel thirsty. He was tempted to stop and take a few mouthfuls, but he hesitated. One lap of that muddy trench water and he'd taste the monster's ghoul-smelling tracks for days.

He decided to wait. Perhaps there would be a rainwater puddle beyond the Tallpines. He hurried onward through the trees and crossed the Twoleg path on the far boundary.

He was back amid the thick undergrowth of oak woods. He moved onward until he found a puddle and lapped up a few mouthfuls of the freshwater. Sandpaw's fur began to prickle with some extra awareness. He recognized sounds and scents familiar from his old watching place on the fence post, and knew instantly where he was. These were the woods that bordered the Twolegplace. He must be very close to his old home now.

Ahead Sandpaw could smell Twolegs and hear their voices, loud and raucous like crows. It was a group of young Twolegs, playing in the woods. Sandpaw crouched and peered ahead through the ferns. The sounds were distant enough to be safe. He changed direction, skirting the noises, making sure he was not seen.

Sandpaw stayed alert and watchful, but not just for Twolegs—Goldenflower might be somewhere nearby. He thought he heard a twig snap in the bushes behind him. He sniffed the air, but smelled nothing new. Was he being watched now? He wondered.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sandpaw sensed movement. At first he thought it was Goldenflower's pale ginger fur, but then he saw a flash of white. He stopped, crouched, and inhaled deeply. The smell was unfamiliar; it was a cat, but not a Thunderclan cat. Sandpaw felt his fur bristle with the instincts of a Clan warrior. He would have to chase the intruder out of Thunderclan territory!

Sandpaw watched the creature moving through the undergrowth. He could see its outline clearly as it skittered between the ferns. Sandpaw waited for it to wander nearer. He crouched lower, his tail waving back and forth in slow rhythm. As the black-and-white cat neared, Sandpaw rocked his haunches from side to side as he prepared to spring. One more heartbeat; then he leaped.

The black-and-white cat jumped into the air, terrified, and raced away through the trees. Sandpaw gave chase.

It's a kittypet! He thought as he raced through the undergrowth,

smelling its fear-scent. *In* my *territory!* He was closing in rapidly on the fleeing animal. It had slowed its headlong rush, preparing to scramble up the wide, mossy trunk of a fallen tree. With the blood roaring in his ears, Sandpaw leaped onto its back in a single bound.

Sandpaw could feel the cat struggling beneath him as he gripped on with all his claws. It let out a desperate and terrified yowl.

Sandpaw released his grip and backed away. The black-and-white cat cringed at the food of the fallen tree, trembling, and looked up at him. Sandpaw lifted his nose, feeling a ripple of disgust at the intruder's easy surrender. This soft, plump house cat, with its round eyes and narrow face, looked very different from the lean, broad-headed cats Sandpaw lived with now. And yet something about this cat seemed familiar.

Sandpaw stared harder. He sniffed, drawing in the other cat's scent. *I don't recognize the smell,* he thought, searching his memory.

Then it came to him.

"Dottie!" he meowed out loud.

"H-ho-how d-d-do you know my n-name?" stammered Dottie, still crouching.

"It's me!" Sandpaw meowed.

The house cat looked confused.

"We were kittens together. I lived in the garden next to you!" Sandpaw insisted.

"Sandy?" mewled Dottie in disbelief. "Is that you? Did you find the wildcats again? Or are you living with new housefolk? You must be, if you're still alive!"

"I'm called Sandpaw now," Sandpaw meowed. He relaxed his shoulders and let his fur fall flat into a sleek pale ginger pelt.

Dottie relaxed too. Her ears pricked up. "*Sandpaw?*" he echoed, amused. "Well, Sandpaw, it looks like your new housefolk don't feed

you enough! You certainly weren't this scrawny last time we met!"

"I don;t need Twolegs to feed me," Sandpaw replied. "I've got a whole forest of food to eat."

"Twolegs?"

"Housefolk. That's what the Clans call them."

Dottie looked bewildered for a second; then her expression changed to one of complete astonishment. "You mean you're really living with the wildcats?"

"Yes!" Sandpaw paused. "You know, you smell... different. Unfamiliar."

"Unfamiliar?" Dottie echoed. She sniffed. "I suppose you're used to the smell of those wildcats now."

Sandpaw shook his head, as if to clear his mind. "But we were kittens together. I should know your smell like I'd know the smell of my birth mother." Then Sandpaw remembered Dottie had passed six moons. No wonder she looked so soft and fat, and smelled so strange. "You've been to the Cutter!" He gasped. "I mean, the vet!"

Dottie shrugged her plump black shoulder. "So?" she mewed.

Sandpaw was speechless. So Oakstar was right.

"Come on, then! What's it like, living wild?" Dottie demanded. "Is it as good as you thought it'd be?"

Sandpaw thought for a moment: about last night, sleeping in a damp den. He thought about mouse bile and clearing away Raggedpelt's dirt, and trying to please both Frostfur and Goldenflower at once during training. He remembered the teasing he suffered about his kittypet blood. Then he remembered the thrill of his first catch, of charging through the forest in pursuit of a squirrel, and of warm evenings beneath the stars sharing tongues with his friends.

"I know who I am now," he meowed simply.

Dottie tipped her head to one side and stared at Sandpaw, clearly confused. "I should be getting home," she mewed. "Mealtime soon."

"Go carefully, Dottie." Sandpaw leaned forward and gave his old friend an affectionate lick between the ears. Dottie nuzzled him in return. "And stay alert. There may be another cat in the area who is not as fond of kittypets—I mean, house cats—as I am."

Dottie's ears flicked nervously at these words. She looked around cautiously and leaped up onto the trunk of the fallen tree. "Goodbye, Sandy," she mewed. "I'll tell everyone at home that you're okay!"

"'By, Dottie," meowed Sandpaw. "Enjoy your meal!"

He watched the white tip of Dottie's tail disappear over the edge of the tree. In the distance he could hear the rattle of dried food being shaken, and a Twoleg voice calling.

Sandpaw turned, his tail high, and started back toward his own home, sniffing the air as he went. *I'll find a finch or two here,* he decided. *Then I'll catch something else on the way back through the pines.* He felt bursting with energy after meeting Dottie and realizing just how lucky he was to live in the Clan.

He looked up at the branches above him and began to stalk silently across the forest floor, every sense alert. Now he just needed to impress Oakstar and Goldenflower, and the day would be perfect.

Chapter 11

Sandpaw returned with a chaffinch gripped firmly between his teeth. He dropped it in front of Goldenflower, who stood waiting in the hollow.

"You're the first one back," meowed the warrior.

"Yeah, but I've got loads more prey to fetch," Sandpaw mewed quickly. "I buried it back—"

"I know exactly what you did," Goldenflower growled. "I've been watching you."

A swish of bushes announced Silverpaw's return. He was carrying a small squirrel in his mouth, which he dropped beside Sandpaw's chaffinch. "Yuck!" he spat. "Squirrels are too furry. I'll be picking hairs out of my teeth all evening."

Goldenflower paid no attention to Silverpaw's grumbling. "Patchpaw's late," he observed. "We'll give her a bit longer and then return to camp."

"But what if she's been bitten by an adder?" Sandpaw protested.

"Then it's her own fault," Goldenflower replied coldly. "There's no room for fools in Thunderclan."

They waited in silence. Silverpaw and Sandpaw exchanged glances, worried about Patchpaw. Goldenflower sat motionless, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

Sandpaw was the first to scent Patchpaw's arrival. He jumped to his paws as the black-and-white cat leaped into the clearing, looking unusually pleased with herself. Dangling from her mouth was the long, diamond-patterned body of an adder.

"Patchpaw! Are you okay?" Sandpaw called.

"Hey!" meowed Silverpaw, rushing forward to admire Patchpaw's catch. "Did that bite you?"

"I was too quick for it!" Patchpaw purred loudly. Then she caught Goldenflower's eye and fell silent.

Goldenflower fixed all three excited apprentices with a cold stare. "Come on," he said shortly. "Let's collect the rest of your prey and get back to camp."

Sandpaw, Silverpaw, and Patchpaw entered the camp, strolling behind Goldenflower. Their impressive day's catch hung from their mouths, although Patchpaw kept tripping over her dead snake. As they emerged from the gorse into the camp, a group of young kits scrambled out of the nursery to watch them pass.

"Look!" Sandpaw heard one of them say. "Apprentices, just back from hunting!" He recognized the little tabby Raggedpelt had hissed at the day before. Sitting next to her was a fluffy gray kit, no more than two moons old. A tiny black kit and a small tortoiseshell stood beside them.

"Isn't that the kittypet, Sandpaw?" squeaked the gray kit.

"Yeah! Look at his sandy fur!" mewed the black one.

"They say he's a good hunter," the tortoiseshell added. "He looks a bit like Frostfur. Do you suppose he's as good as him?"

"I can't wait to start my training," mewed the tabby. "I'm going to be the best warrior Thunderclan has ever seen!"

Sandpaw lifted his chin, feeling proud at the kits' admiring comments. He followed his two friends into the center of the clearing.

"An *adder*!" Silverpaw mewed again, as the apprentices dropped their catch for the other cats to share.

"What should I do with it?" asked Patchpaw, sniffing the snake's

long body as it lay beside the heap.

"Can you eat adders?" asked Silverpaw.

"Trust you to think of your stomach!" Sandpaw joked, butting Silverpaw with his head.

"Well, I wouldn't want to eat it," murmured Patchpaw. "I mean, my mouth tastes pretty foul after carrying it back."

"Let's put it on the tree stump, then," suggested Silverpaw, "so that Fernpaw and Firepaw can see it when they get back."

They each carried a piece of their fresh-kill, and the adder, back to their den. Silverpaw carefully placed the adder on the stump, arranging the snake so that it could be seen clearly from all sides. Then they ate. When they finished they sat close together to groom one another and talk.

"I wonder who Oakstar will choose to go to the Gathering?" Sandpaw meowed. "It'll be full moon tomorrow."

"Firepaw and Fernpaw have been twice already," replied Silverpaw.

"Perhaps Oakstar will choose one of us this time," mewed Sandpaw. "After all, we've been training for almost three moons now."

"But Firepaw and Fernpaw are still the eldest apprentices," Patchpaw pointed out.

Sandpaw nodded. "And this Gathering will be an important one. It'll be the first time the Clans have met since Windclan disappeared. No cat knows what Shadowclan is going to say about it."

Goldenflower's low meow interrupted them. "You are right, youngster." The warrior had strolled up to them unnoticed. "By the way, Sandpaw," he added smoothly, "Oakstar wants to see you."

Sandpaw looked up, startled. Why would Oakstar want to see him?

"Now—if you can spare the time," Goldenflower meowed.

Sandpaw jumped up immediately and bounded off across the clearing toward Oakstar's den.

Oakstar was sitting outside, her tail flicking restlessly back and forth. When she saw Sandpaw she stood up and looked steadily down at him. "Goldenflower has told me that he saw you talking with a cat from the Twolegplace today," she meowed quietly.

"But—" Sandpaw began.

"He said that you began by fighting with this cat but ended up sharing tongues with it."

"That's true," Sandpaw admitted, feeling his fur prickle defensively. "But she was an old friend. We grew up together." He paused and swallowed. "When I was a kittypet."

Oakstar looked at him for a long moment. "Do you miss your old life, Sandpaw?" she asked. "Think carefully, now."

"No." *How can Oakstar think that?* Sandpaw wondered. His head was spinning. What was Oakstar trying to make him say?

"Do you wish to leave the Clan?"

"Of course not!" Sandpaw was shocked by her question.

Oakstar didn't seem to hear the passion in his answer. She shook her head, looking suddenly old and tired. "I won't judge you if you leave us, Sandpaw. Perhaps I expected too much of you. Perhaps my judgment has been clouded by the Clan's need for new warriors."

Panic swept through Sandpaw at the thought of leaving the Clan forever. "But my place is here! This is my home," he protested.

"I need more than that, Sandpaw. I need to be able to trust in your loyalty to Thunderclan, especially now that it looks like Shadowclan is planning an attack. We don't have room for anyone who isn't sure whether their heart lies in the past or the present."

Sandpaw took a deep breath and chose his next words carefully.

"When I saw Dottie today—that's the house cat Goldenflower saw me talking with—I saw what life would have been like if I stayed with the Twolegs. I felt happy that I had not stayed. I was proud I left." He held Oakstar's gaze without flinching. "Meeting Dottie made me certain I made the right decision. I could never have been satisfied with the soft life of a kittypet."

Oakstar looked closely at him for a moment, her eyes narrow. Then she nodded. "Very well," she said. "I believe you."

Sandpaw dipped his head respectfully and let out a silent sigh of relief.

"I spoke to Raggedpelt earlier," meowed Oakstar in a lighter tone. "She thinks a lot of you. She's a wise old she-cat, you know. And I suspect she wasn't always bad-tempered. Indeed, I think that I could grow to like her."

Sandpaw felt an unexpected glow of pleasure at these words. Maybe, in caring for Raggedpelt, his admiration for her had grown into affection, despite the she-cat's ill temper. Whatever the reason, he was glad Oakstar liked her too.

"But there is something about her that I don't trust," Oakstar went on quietly. "She will stay with Thunderclan for now, but remain as a prisoner. The queens will care for her. You must concentrate on your training."

Sandpaw nodded and waited to be dismissed, but Oakstar hadn't finished. "Sandpaw, although you showed bad judgment today in talking to a house cat, Goldenflower *was* impressed by your hunting skills. In fact, he reported that you all did well. I am pleased with your progress. You will come to the Gathering—all three of you."

Sandpaw could hardly stand still. His body tingled with excitement. The Gathering! "What about Firepaw and Fernpaw?" he mewed.

"They will remain behind and guard the camp," replied Oakstar. "Now you may go." She flicked her long tail to show he was dismissed, and returned to her grooming.

Silverpaw and Pacthpaw looked stunned to see Sandpaw bounding happily toward them. They had been waiting nervously for him beside the tree stump. Sandpaw sat down and looked at his friends.

"Well?" Silverpaw demanded. "What did she say?"

"Goldenflower told us you'd been sharing tongues with a *kittypet* this morning," burst out Patchpaw. "Are you in trouble?"

"No. Although Oakstar wasn't pleased," Sandpaw admitted ruefully. "She thought I might want to leave Thunderclan."

"You don't, do you?" asked Patchpaw.

"Of course he doesn't!" mewed Silverpaw.

Sandpaw gave his silver tabby friend an affectionate swipe. "Yeah, you'd hate that. You need me to catch mice for you! All you catch these days are hairy old squirrels!"

Silverpaw dodged out of the way of Sandpaw's blow, and reared up on his back legs to retaliate.

"You'll never guess what else she said!" Sandpaw went on. He was too excited to waste time play-fighting.

Silverpaw immediately dropped back onto all four paws. "What?" he asked.

"We're going to the Gathering!"

Silverpaw let out a yowl of delight and bounded up onto the tree stump. One of his back paws knocked the adder flying. It hit Patchpaw on the head and wrapped itself around her neck.

Patchpaw spat with alarm and surprise, and then turned on Silverpaw. "Watch it!" she hissed crossly. She shook the adder onto the ground.

"Scared it might try to bite you?" Sandpaw teased. He crouched down, hissing, and sidled up to Patchpaw.

Patchpaw twitched her whiskers and retorted, "Some snake you'd make!" She leaped onto Sandpaw and rolled him easily onto his back.

Silverpaw reached down from the tree stump and gave Patchpaw's tail a tug. As Patchpaw turned to thump Silverpaw with a soft forepaw, Sandpaw jumped to his feet and leaped into them both, sending Silverpaw flying from the stump. All three cats tumbled into the dirt and tussled on the ground. Finally they fell apart and settled themselves, panting, beside the tree stump.

"Are Firepaw and Fernpaw coming too?" puffed Silverpaw.

"Nope!" Sandpaw replied, unable to disguise the note of triumph in his voice. "They have to stay behind and guard the camp."

"Oh, let me tell them!" begged Silverpaw. "I can't wait to see the looks on their faces!"

"Me neither!" Sandpaw agreed. "I can't believe *we're* going instead of *them*! Especially after Goldenflower saw me with Dottie today!"

"That was just bad luck," answered Silverpaw. "We all caught a load of prey in the assessment. That must be what decided it."

"I wonder what the Gathering will be like," mewed Patchpaw.

"It'll be fantastic," Silverpaw replied confidently. "I bet all the great warriors will be there. Rowanberry, Stonefur..."

But Sandpaw wasn't listening anymore. Instead, he found himself thinking about Goldenflower and Dottie. Silverpaw was right—it *was* bad luck that the great warrior had been observing him when he had met his old friend. Why couldn't he have been watching Silverpaw or Patchpaw instead? In fact, it was bad luck that Goldenflower had sent him so near the Twolegplace at all.

Suddenly a dark thought entered Sandpaw's mind: Why *has* Goldenflower sent him so near his old haunts? Had he wanted to test him? Could it be the great dark warrior didn't trust his loyalty to Thunderclan?

Chapter 12

Author's Note: Thank you to @4l3h_dr34m for making this amazing cover for me! I really appreciate it! <3

Sandpaw peered over the brow of a bush-covered slope. Silverpaw and Patchpaw crouched beside him. Next to them a group of Thunderclan elders, queens, and warriors waited in the undergrowth for Oakstar to give the signal.

Sandpaw had not been to this place since his first journey with Frostfur and Goldenflower. The steep-sided glade looked different now. The rich greenness of the woods had been bleached away by the cold light of the full moon, and the leaves on the trees glowed silver. At the bottom stood the large oaks that marked where the corner of each Clan's territory touched the other three.

The air was thick with the warm scent of cats from the other Clans. Sandpaw could see them quite clearly in the moonlight, moving about below in the grassy clearing that lay between the four oaks. In the center of the clearing, a large, jagged rock rose from the forest floor like a broken tooth.

"Look at all those cats down there!" hissed Patchpaw under her breath.

"There's Willowstar!" Silverpaw hissed back. "Riverclan's leader."

"Where?" Sandpaw mewed, nudging Silverpaw impatiently.

"That pale silver tabby, beside the Great Rock."

Sandpaw followed Silverpaw's nod and saw a huge tom, even bigger than Frostfur, sitting at the center of the clearing. His striped coat shone paler in the moonlight. Even from this distance, his old face showed the signs of a harsh life, and his mouth looked twisted, as if it had once been broken and had healed badly.

"Hey!" mewed Silverpaw. "Did you see Firepaw spit when I told her I hoped she had a nice evening at home?"

"You bet!" Sandpaw purred.

Patchpaw interrupted them with a muffled growl. "Look! There's Brokenstar-Shadowclan's leader," she hissed.

Sandpaw looked down at the dark brown tabby. Her fur was unusually long and her face was broad and flattened. There was a stillness in the way she sat and stared around her that made Sandpaw's fur prickle uncomfortably.

"She looks pretty nasty," Sandpaw muttered.

"Yeah." agreed Silverpaw. "She's certainly got a reputation among all the Clans for not suffering fools gladly. And she's not been leader that long-four moons, ever since her father, Yellowstar, died."

"What does the leader of Windclan look like?" Sandpaw asked.

"Tallstar? I've never seen her, but I know she's black and white with a very long tail." answered Silverpaw.

"Can you see her now?" asked Patchpaw.

Silverpaw peered down, searching the crowd of cats below. "Nope!"

"Can you scent *any* Windclan cats?" Sandpaw asked.

Silverpaw shook his head. "No."

Frostfur's meow sounded softly beside them. "The Windclan cats may just be late."

"But what if they don't turn up at all?" mewed Silverpaw

"Hush! We must all be patient. These are difficult times. Now keep quiet. Oakstar will give the signal to move soon." Frostfur meowed quietly.

As he spoke, Oakstar stood, and, holding her tail high, flicked it

from one side to the other. Sandpaw's heart missed a beat as the Thunderclan cats rose as one and bounded through the bushes down toward the meeting place. He raced alongside them, feeling the wind rush in his ears and his paws tingle with anticipation.

The Thunderclan cats paused instinctively on the edge of the clearing, outside the boundary of the oaks. Oakstar sniffed the air. Then she nodded and the troop moved forward into the clearing.

Sandpaw felt thrilled. The other cats looked even more impressive close up, milling about the Great Rock. A large white warrior strode past. Sandpaw and Patchpaw looked at her in awe.

"Look at her paws!" Patchpaw murmured.

Sandpaw looked down and realized the huge paws of this great she-cat were jet black.

"It must be Blackfoot," mewed Silverpaw. "Shadowclan's new deputy."

Blackfoot stalked over to Brokenstar and sat down beside her. The Shadowclan leader acknowledged her with a twitch of one ear, but said nothing.

"When does the meeting begin?" Patchpaw asked Brindleface.

"Be patient, Patchpaw," he answered. "The sky is clear tonight, so we have plenty of time."

Frostfur leaned over and added, "We warriors like to spend a little time boasting about our victories, while the elders swap tales about the ancient days before the Twolegs came here." All three apprentices looked up at him and saw his whiskers twitch mischievously.

Runningwind, Halftail, and Speckletail headed straight off toward a group of elderly cats who were settling themselves below one of the oak trees. Brindleface and Frostfur strolled over to another pair of warriors whom Sandpaw did not know. He sniffed the air and recognized their scent as Riverclan.

Oakstar's voice sounded behind the three apprentices. "Don't waste any of your time tonight," she warned. "This is a good opportunity to meet your enemies. Listen to them; remember what they look like and how they behave. There is a great deal to be learned from these meetings."

"And say little," warned Goldenflower. "Don't give anything away that might be used against us once the moon has waned."

"Don't worry, we won't!" Sandpaw promised hastily, looking into Goldenflower's eyes. The feeling that Goldenflower didn't trust his loyalty lingered with him still.

The two warriors nodded and moved on, and the apprentices were left alone. They looked at each other.

"What do we do now?" Sandpaw asked.

"What they said," replied Patchpaw. "Listen."

"And don't say too much." Silverpaw added.

Sandpaw nodded gravely. "I'm going to see where Goldenflower went," he mewed.

"Well I'm going to find Frostfur," mewed Silverpaw. "You coming, Patchpaw?"

"No, thanks," Patchpaw replied. "I'm going to find some of the other apprentices."

"Okay, we'll meet up later," mewed Sandpaw, and he trotted in the direction Goldenflower had taken.

He scented Goldenflower easily and found him sitting at the center of a group of huge warriors, behind the Great Rock. Goldenflower was speaking.

It was a tale Sandpaw had heard many times at camp. Goldenflower was describing his recent battle against the Riverclan hunting party. "I wrestled like a Lionclan cat. Three warriors tried to hold me but I threw them off. I fought them until two lay knocked out and the

other had run off into the forest like a kit crying for its mother."

This time Goldenflower didn't mention killing Bluefur in vengeance for Redtail's death. *Perhaps it's so he doesn't offend the Riverclan warriors,* Sandpaw decided.

Sandpaw listened politely to the end of the story, but a familiar scent was distracting him. As soon as Goldenflower had finished speaking, Sandpaw turned and crept away toward the sweet smell, which was coming from a group of cats nearby.

He found Silverpaw sitting among these cats, but that was not the scent he had been following. Sitting opposite Silverpaw, between two Riverclan she-cats, was Spottedleaf. Sandpaw glanced at him shyly and settled himself beside his friend.

"Still no scent of Windclan," he mewed to Silverpaw.

"The meeting hasn't begun yet, they may still come," replied his friend. "Look, there's Runningnose. She's the new Shadowclan medicine cat, apparently." He nodded toward a small gray and white cat at the center of the group.

"I can see why they call her Runningnose." Sandpaw remarked. The medicine cat's nose was wet at the tip and encrusted around the edges.

"Yep." replied Silverpaw with a scornful growl. "I can't see why they appointed her when she can't even cure her own cold!"

Runningnose was telling the cats about a herb that medicine cats had used in the old days to cure kitten-cough. "Since the Twolegs came and filled the place with hard earth and strange flowers," she complained in a high-pitched yowl, "the herb has disappeared, and kittens die needlessly in cold weather."

The cats gathered around her yowled their disapproval.

"It never would have happened in the time of the great Clan cats," growled a black Riverclan tom.

"Indeed," mewled a silver tabby. "The great cats would have killed

any Twolegs that dared enter their territory. If Tigerclan roamed this forest still, Twolegs would not have built this far into our land."

Then Sandpaw heard Spottedleaf's quiet mew. "If Tigerclan still roamed these forests, *we* would hardly have made our territory here, either."

"What's Tigerclan?" mewed a small voice beside them. Sandpaw noticed a little tabby apprentice from one of the other Clans sitting beside him.

"Tigerclan is one of the great cat Clans that used to roam the forest." Silverpaw explained quietly. "Tigerclan is cats of the night, big as horses, with jet-black stripes. Then there is Lionclan. They're..." Silverpaw hesitated, frowning as he tried to remember.

"Oh! I've heard of them," mewed the tabby. "They were as big as Tigerclan cats, with yellow fur and golden manes like rays of the sun."

Silverpaw nodded. "And then there is the other one, Spottyclan or something like that..."

"I suspect you're thinking of Leopardclan, young Silverpaw," meowed a voice from behind them.

"Frostfur!" Silverpaw greeted his mentor with an affectionate touch of his nose.

Frostfur shook his head in mock despair. "Don't you youngsters know your history? Leopardclan are the swiftest cats, huge and golden, spotted with black awprints. You can thank Leopardclan for the speed and hunting skills you now possess."

"Thank them? Why?" asked the tabby.

Frostfur agved down at the little apprentice and answered, "There is a trace of all the great cats in every cat today. We would not be night hunters without our Tigerclan ancestors, and our love of the sun's warmth comes from Lionclan." He paused. 'You are a Shadowclan apprentice, aren't you? How many moons are you?"

The tabby stared awkwardly down at the ground. "S-six moons," she stammered, not meeting Frostfur's eye.

"Rather small for six moons," Frostfur murmured. His tone was gentle, but his gaze was searching and serious.

"My mother was small too," answered the tabby nervously. She bowed her head and backed away, disappearing into the crowd of cats with a twitch of her light brown tail.

Frostfur turned to Sandpaw and Silverpaw. "Well, she might be small, but at least she was curious. If only you two showed as much interest in the stories your elders tell!"

"Sorry, Frostfur," Sandpaw and Silverpaw mewed, exchanging doubtful glances.

Frostfur grunted good-naturedly. "Oh, go away, the pair of you! Next time I hope Oakstar decides to bring apprentices who appreciate what they hear." And with a halfhearted growl he chased them away from the group.

"Come on," purred Silverpaw as they leaped away, "Let's see where Patchpaw's gotten to."

Patchpaw was in the middle of a group of apprentices who were clamoring for him to tell them about the battle with Riverclan.

"Go on, Patchpaw, tell us what happened!" called a handsome black-and-white tom.

Patchpaw shyly shuffled her paws and shook her head.

"Come on, Patchpaw!" insisted another.

Patchpaw looked around and saw Sandpaw and Silverpaw at the edge of the crowd. Sandpaw nodded encouragingly. Patchpaw flicked her tail in acknowledgement and began her story.

She stumbled a bit at first, but as she continued, the tremor disappeared from her voice and her audience leaned in, their eyes growing wider.

"Fur was flying everywhere. Blood spattered the leaves of the bramble bushes, bright red against green. I'd just fought off a huge warrior and sent her squealing into the bushes when the ground shook, and I heard a warrior scream. It was Bluefur! Redtail raced past me, her mouth dripping blood and her fur torn. 'Bluefur is dead!' she howled. Then she rushed off to help Goldenflower as he fought another warrior."

"Who would have thought Patchpaw was such a good story-teller," Silverpaw murmured to Sandpaw, sounding impressed.

But Sandpaw was thinking of something else. What was it Patchpaw had said? That *Redtail* had killed Bluefur? But according to Goldenflower, Bluefur had killed Redtail and he, Goldenflower, had killed Bluefur in revenge.

"If Redtail killed Bluefur, who killed Redtail?" Sandpaw hissed to Silverpaw.

"If who did what?" Silverpaw echoed absentmindedly. He was only half listening to Sandpaw.

Sandpaw shook his head to clear it. *Patchpaw must have been mistaken*, he thought. *She must have meant Goldenflower.*

Patchpaw was coming to the end of her story. "Finally, Redtail dragged the wailing cat off Goldenflower by her tail and, with the strength of the whole of Tigerclan, flung her into the bushes."

A moving shadow caught Sandpaw's eye. He glanced around and saw Goldenflower standing a short distance away. The warrior was watching Patchpaw with an iron stare. Unaware of her mentor's presence, Patchpaw continued to answer question after question from her enthusiastic audience.

"What were Bluefur's dying words?"

"Is it true that Bluefur had never lost a battle before?"

Patchpaw replied promptly, with her voice high and clear and her eyes shining. But when Sandpaw glanced back at Goldenflower, he saw a look of horror and then fury creep over the warrior's face.

Clearly Goldenflower wasn't enjoying Patchpaw's story at all.

Sandpaw was just about to say something to Silverpaw when a loud yowl signaled to all the cats for quiet. Sandpaw couldn't help feeling relieved as Patchpaw fell silent at last, and Goldenflower turned away.

Sandpaw looked up to see where the yowl had come from. Three cats sat silhouetted against the moonlit sky on top of the Great Rock. They were Oakstar, Brokenstar, and Willowstar.

The Clan leaders were about to begin the meeting. But where was the Windclan leader?

"Surely they won't start the meeting without Tallstar?" Sandpaw hissed under his breath.

"I don't know," Silverpaw muttered back.

"Haven't you noticed? There isn't a single Windclan cat here." whispered a Riverclan apprentice on the other side of Sandpaw.

Sandpaw guessed that similar conversations were going on all around him. As the other cats were gathering beneath the Great Rock, an unsettled murmuring rumbled in their throats.

"We can't start yet," yowled one voice above the noise. "Where are the Windclan representatives? We must wait until all the Clans are present."

On top of the rock, Oakstar stepped forward. Her reddish-brown fur glowed almost white in the moonlight. "Cats of all Clans, welcome," she meowed in a clear voice. "It is true that Windclan is not present, but Brokenstar wishes to speak anyway."

Brokenstar padded noiselessly up to stand beside Oakstar. She surveyed the crowd for a few moments, her orange eyes burning. Then she took a deep breath and began. "Friends, I come to speak to you tonight about the needs of Shadowclan-"

But she was interrupted by raised, impatient voices from below.

"Where is Tallstar?" cried one.

"Where are the Windclan warriors?" yowled another.

Brokenstar stretched up to her full height and lashed her tail from side to side. "As the leader of Shadowclan, it is my right to address you here!" she growled in a voice full of menace. The crowd fell into an uneasy silence. All around him, Sandpaw could smell the acrid tang of fear.

Brokenstar yowled again. "We all know that the hard time of leaf-bare, and late newleaf, have left us with little prey in our hunting grounds. But we also know that Windclan, Riverclan, and Thunderclan lost many kits in the freezing weather that came so late this season. Shadowclan did not lose kits. We are hardened to the cold north wind. Our kits are stronger than yours from the moment they are born. And so we find ourselves with many mouths to feed, and too little prey to feed them."

The crowd, still and silent, listened anxiously.

"The needs of Shadowclan are simple. In order to survive, we must increase our hunting territory. That is why I insist that you allow Shadowclan warriors to hunt in your territories."

A shocked but muted growl rippled through the crowd.

"Share our hunting grounds?" called the outraged voice of Goldenflower.

"It is unprecedented!" cried a tortoiseshell tom from Riverclan. "The Clans have never shared hunting rights!"

"Should Shadowclan be punished because our kits thrive?" yowled Brokenstar from the Great Rock. "Do you want us to watch our young starve? You *must* share what you have with us."

"*Must!*" spat Speckletail furiously from the back of the crowd.

"Must," repeated Brokenstar. "Windclan failed to understand this. In the end, we were forced to drive them out of their territory."

Snarls of outrage burst from the crowd, but Brokenstar's caterwaul rang loud above them. "And, if we have to, we will drive you all from your hunting grounds in order to feed our hungry kits."

There was instant silence. On the other side of the clearing, Sandpaw heard a Riverclan apprentice start to mutter something, but she was quickly hushed by an elder.

Satisfied that she had every cat's attention, Brokenstar continued. "Each year, the Twolegs spoil more of our territory. At least one Clan must remain strong, if all the Clans are to survive. Shadowclan thrives while you all struggle. And there may come a time when you will need us to protect you."

"You doubt our strength?" hissed Goldenflower. His yellow eyes glared threateningly at the Shadowclan leader, and his powerful shoulders rippled with tension.

"I do not ask for your answer now." Brokenstar ignored the warrior's challenge. "You must each go away and consider my words. But bear this in mind: Would you prefer to share your prey, or be driven out and left homeless and starving?"

Warriors, elders, and apprentices looked at one another in disbelief. In the anxious pause that followed, Willowstar stepped forward. "I have already agreed to allow Shadowclan some hunting rights in the river that runs through our territory," he meowed quietly, gazing down on his Clan.

Horror and humiliation rippled through the Riverclan cats at their leader's words.

"We were not consulted!" cried a grizzled silver tabby.

"I feel that this is best for our Clan. For all the Clans," Willowstar explained, his voice heavy with resignation. "There are plenty of fish in the river. It is better to share our prey than to spill blood fighting over it."

"And what of Thunderclan?" Speckletail croaked. "Oakstar! Have you, too, agreed to this outrageous demand?"

Oakstar unwaveringly met the old cat's gaze. "I have made no agreement with Brokenstar except that I shall discuss her proposal with my Clan after the Gathering."

"Well, at least that's something," muttered Silverpaw in Sandpaw's ear. "We'll show them we're not as soft as the yellow-bellied Riverclan."

Brokenstar spoke up again, her rasping voice sounding arrogant and strong after Willowstar's surrender. "I also bring news that is important to the safety of your kits. A Shadowclan cat has turned rogue and spurned the warrior code. We chased her out of our camp, but we do not know where she is now. She looks like a ragged old creature, but she has a bite like Tigerclan."

Sandpaw's fur bristled. Could Brokenstar possibly be talking about Raggedpelt? He pricked up his ears, curious to hear more.

"She is dangerous. I warn you-do not offer shelter to her. And"-Brokenstar paused dramatically-"until she is caught and killed, I urge you to keep a close eye on your kits."

Sandpaw knew from the nervous growl that rumbled in the throats of the Thunderclan cats that they, too, had thought of Raggedpelt. The bold she-cat had done nothing to endear herself to her reluctant hosts, and Sandpaw guessed it wouldn't take much to drum up hatred against her-even the words of a despised enemy like Brokenstar would be enough.

The Shadowclan warriors began to push their way out of the throng of cats. Brokenstar leaped down from the rock, and her warriors immediately surrounded her and escorted her away from Fourtrees, back into Shadowclan territory. The remaining Shadowclan cats followed quickly behind, including the undersize tabby Frostfur had questioned earlier. But among the other Shadowclan apprentices, the tabby no longer looked unusually small-they all looked tiny and undernourished, more like kits of three or four moons than full-fledged apprentices.

"What do you think of all that?" Silverpaw mewed in a low voice.

Patchpaw bounded over before Sandpaw could reply. "What's going to happen now?" she wailed, her fur fluffed up in alarm and her eyes wider than ever.

Sandpaw didn't answer. The elders of Thunderclan were gathering nearby, and he was straining to hear what they were saying.

"That must be Raggedpelt she was talking about," growled Speckletail.

"Well, she did snap at Tigerclaw's youngest kit the other day," murmured Smallear darkly. She was the oldest nursery queen, and fiercely protective of all the kits.

"And we've left her behind, with the camp virtually unguarded!" wailed Halftail, who for once seemed to be having no trouble hearing everything.

"I tried to tell you she was a danger to us," hissed Darkstripe. "Oakstar has to listen to reason now and get rid of her before she harms any of our young!"

Goldenflower strode up to the group. "We must return to camp at once and deal with this rogue!" he yowled.

Sandpaw didn't stop to hear more. His mind was spinning. Loyal as he was to his Clan, he just couldn't believe that Raggedpelt would be a danger to kits. Frightened for the old she-cat, burning with questions only she could answer, he raced away from Silverpaw and Patchpaw without a word.

He charged up the hillside and pelted through the forest. Had he been mistaken about Raggedpelt? If he warned her about the danger she was in, would he be risking his own position in Thunderclan? Whatever trouble he got himself into, he had to find out the truth from her before the other cats go back to the camp.

Chapter 13

Sandpaw reached the edge of the ravine and looked down at the camp. He was panting and his paws were slippery with dew. He sniffed the air. He was alone. There was still time to speak to Raggedpelt before the others returned from the Gathering. Silently, he jumped down the rocky slope and slipped through the gorse tunnel unnoticed.

The camp was still and quiet, apart from the muted snuffle of sleeping cats. Sandpaw quickly crept around the edge of the clearing to Raggedpelt's nest. The old medicine cat was curled on top of her mossy bedding.

"Raggedpelt," he hissed urgently. "Raggedpelt! Wake up; it's important!"

Two amber eyes opened and glinted in the moonlight. "I wasn't sleeping," meowed Raggedpelt quietly. She sounded calm and alert. "You came straight from the Gathering to me? That must mean you've heard." She blinked slowly and looked away. "So Brokenstar kept her promise."

"What promise?" Sandpaw felt very confused. Raggedpelt seemed to know more than he did about what was going on.

"Shadowclan's noble leader promised to drive me from every Clan territory." Raggedpelt replied dryly. "What did she say about me?"

"She warned us that our kits were in danger as long as we sheltered the Shadowclan rogue. She didn't say your name, but Thunderclan guessed who she was talking about. You must leave before the others get back. You are in danger!"

"You mean they believed Brokenstar?" Raggedpelt flattened her ears and swished her tail angrily.

"Yes!" Sandpaw meowed urgently. "Darkstripe says you're dangerous. The other cats are scared of what you might do. Goldenflower is planning to come back and... I don't know... I think you should go before they get here!"

In the distance Sandpaw could hear the yowls of angry cats. Raggedpelt struggled stiffly to her paws. Sandpaw gave her a nudge to help her up, his mind still spinning with questions. "What did Brokenstar mean when she warned us to keep a close eye on our kits?" he couldn't stop himself from asking. "Would you really do something like that?"

"Would I *what*?"

"Would you harm our kits?"

Raggedpelt flared her nostrils and looked steadily at him. "Do *you* think so?"

Sandpaw met her gaze without flinching. "No, I don't believe you would ever harm a kit. But why would Brokenstar say such a thing?"

The noise of the cats was coming nearer, and with it, the scents of aggression and anger. Raggedpelt looked wildly from side to side.

"Go!" Sandpaw urged. Her safety was more important than his curiosity.

But Raggedpelt remained where she was and stared at him. A calm look suddenly came into her wide eyes. "Sandpaw, you believe I'm innocent, and I'm grateful for that. If *you* believe me, then others might. And I know Oakstar will give me a fair hearing. I can't run forever. I'm too old. I shall stay here and face whatever your Clan decides for me." She sighed and sank down onto her bony haunches.

"But what about Goldenflower? What if he—"

"He is headstrong, and he knows the power he has over the other Clan cats—they are in awe of him. But even he will obey Oakstar."

Rustling in the undergrowth beyond the camp boundary told

Sandpaw that the cats were almost at the entrance.

"Go away, Sandpaw," hissed Raggedpelt, baring her blackened teeth at him. "Don't make trouble for yourself by being seen with me now. There is nothing you can do for me. Have faith in your leader, and let her decide what happens to me."

Sandpaw realized Raggedpelt had made up her mind. He touched his nose to her patchy fur, then crept silently away into the shadows to watch.

Through the gorse came the cats—Oakstar first, accompanied by Frostfur. Lionheart, and Willowpelt were right behind them. Lionheart raced away from the troop immediately and ran toward the nursery, the fur on her tail bristling in alarm. Goldenflower and Darkstripe strode into the clearing, shoulder to shoulder, looking grim. The others followed behind, with Patchpaw and Silverpaw at the rear. As soon as he saw his friends, Sandpaw trotted out to join them.

"You went to warn Raggedpelt, didn't you?" whispered Silverpaw when Sandpaw reached his side.

"Yes, I did." Sandpaw admitted. "But she won't leave. She trusts Oakstar to treat her fairly. Did anyone miss me?"

"Only us," replied Patchpaw.

Around the camp, the cats who had stayed behind began to wake up. They must have scented the aggression and heard the tension in the voices of the returning cats, for they all came running into the clearing, their tails held high.

"What has happened?" called a dappled tortoiseshell and white warrior named Dappletail.

"Brokenstar has demanded hunting rights for Shadowclan in our territory!" replied Longtail loudly enough for all the cats to hear.

"And she warned us about a rogue cat who will harm our kits!" added Willowpelt. "It must be Raggedpelt!"

Meows of anger and distress rose from the crowd.

"Silence!" ordered Oakstar, leaping onto the Highrock. Instinctively, the cats settled in front of her.

A loud screech made every cat turn its head toward the fallen tree where the elders slept. Goldenflower and Darkstipre were dragging Raggedpelt roughly from her nest. She shrieked furiously as they hauled her into the clearing and dumped her in front of the Highrock. Sandpaw felt every muscle in his body tense. Without thinking, he dropped into a low crouch, ready to spring at Raggedpelt's persecutors.

"Wait, Sandpaw," growled Silverpaw in his ear. "Let Oakstar deal with this."

"What is going on?" demanded Oakstar, jumping down from the Highrock and glaring at her warriors. "I gave no order to attack our prisoner."

Goldenflower and Darkstripe instantly let go of Raggedpelt, who crouched in the dust, hissing and spitting.

Lionheart appeared from the nursery and pushed her way through to the front of the Clan. "We got back in time," she meowed with a gasp. "The kits are safe!"

"Of course they are!" snapped Oakstar.

Lionheart seemed taken aback. "But... you *are* going to throw Raggedpelt out, aren't you?" she meowed, her green eyes wide.

"Throw her out?" spat Darkstripe, unleashing her claws. "We should kill her now!"

Oakstar fixed her piercing amber eyes on Darkstripe's angry face. "And what has she done?" she asked with icy calm.

Sandpaw held his breath.

"You were at the Gathering! Brokenstar said she—" Darkstripe began.

"Brokenstar said only that there is a rogue somewhere in the woods," meowed Oakstar, her voice menacingly quiet. "She did not mention Raggedpelt by name. The kits are safe. For as long as she is in my Clan, Raggedpelt will not be harmed in any way."

Oakstar's words were met with silence, and Sandpaw heaved a sigh of relief.

Raggedpelt looked up at Oakstar and narrowed her eyes respectfully. "I will leave now, if you wish it, Oakstar."

"There is no need," Oakstar replied. "You have done nothing wrong, You will be safe here." The Thunderclan leader lifted her gaze to the crowd of cats that surrounded Raggedpelt and meowed, "It is time we discussed the real threat on our Clan: Brokenstar. We have already begun to prepare for an attack by Shadowclan," Oakstar began. "We'll carry on with those preparations, and patrol our borders more frequently. Windclan has gone. Riverclan has given hunting rights to Shadowclan warriors. Thunderclan stands alone against Brokenstar."

A murmur of defiance rippled through the cats, and Sandpaw felt his fur prickle with anticipation.

"Then we're not going to agree to Brokenstar's demands?" meowed Goldenflower.

"Clans have never shared hunting rights before," Oakstar answered. "They have always managed to support themselves in their own territories. There is no reason why this should change." Goldenflower nodded approvingly.

"But can we defend ourselves against a Shadowclan attack?" asked Speckletail's remulous voice. "Windclan didn't manage it! Riverclan won't even try!"

Oakstar met his old eyes with her steady gaze. "We must try. We will not give up our territory without a fight."

All around the clearing, Sandpaw saw the cats nodding in agreement.

"I shall travel to the Moonstone tomorrow," Oakstar announced. "The warriors of Starclan will give me the strength I need to lead Thunderclan through this dark time. You must all get some rest. We have a lot to do when daylight comes. I wish to talk with Frostfur now." Without another word, she turned and strode toward her den.

Sandpaw noticed the look of wonder that had entered the eyes of some of the cats when Oakstar had mentioned the Moonstone. Now the Clan cats hurriedly gathered in groups, meowing in hushed voices full of excitement.

"What's the Moonstone?" Sandpaw asked Silverpaw.

"It's a rock deep underground that shines in the dark," whispered Silverpaw. His voice was hoarse with awe. "All Clan leaders have to spend one night at the Moonstone when they are first chosen. There, the spirits of Starclan share with them."

"Share *what* with them?"

Silverpaw frowned. "I don't know," he admitted. "I know only that the new leaders have to sleep near the stone, and as they sleep, they have special dreams. After that, they have the gift of nine lives, and take the name 'star.'"

Sandpaw watched Raggedpelt limp back to her shadowy nest. It looked like Goldenflower's rough treatment had aggravated her old injury. As he trotted back to the apprentices' den, Sandpaw decided to ask Spottedleaf for more poppy seeds in the morning.

"So what happened?" mewed Fernpaw eagerly, popping his head out of the den. He seemed to have forgotten how much he resented the new apprentice in his eagerness to hear about the Gathering.

"It's like Longtail said. Brokenstar demanded hunting rights..." Silverpaw began.

Firepaw and Fernpaw sat and listened, but Sandpaw was watching the camp. He could see the silhouettes of Oakstar and Frostfur sitting close together outside her den, talking urgently.

Then he noticed the small shape of Patchpaw at the entrance to the

warriors' den. Goldenflower stood beside her. Sandpaw saw Patchpaw's ears flatten as the young cat flinched away from Goldenflower's fierce words. The pale warrior loomed over her, twice her size, his eyes and teeth flashing in the moonlight. What was he saying to Patchpaw? Sandpaw was just about to creep nearer and listen when Patchpaw backed away, turned, and ran across the clearing.

Sandpaw greeted Patchpaw as she reached the apprentice's den, but Patchpaw hardly seemed to notice him. Instead, she pushed her way inside the den without a word.

Sandpaw got up to follow her when he saw Frostfur approaching.

"Well," meowed the Thunderclan deputy, striding up to the apprentices. "It seems that Sandpaw, Silverpaw, and Patchpaw are about to reach another important stage in their training."

"What's that?" mewed Silverpaw, looking excited.

"Oakstar wishes you three to accompany her on her journey to the Moonstone!" Frostfur didn't miss the look of disappointment on the faces of Fernpaw and Firepaw, because he added, "Don't worry, you two; you'll make the journey soon enough. For now, Thunderclan needs your strength and skill at the camp. I will remain here also."

Sandpaw looked past Frostfur to his leader. She was moving from one group of warriors to another, meowing instructions to each. Why had she chosen him for this journey? He wondered.

"She wants you to rest now," Frostfur continued. "But first go to Spottedleaf and collect the herbs you will need on this expedition. It's a long way. You will need something to give you strength and quell your appetite. There will be little time for catching prey."

Silverpaw nodded, and Sandpaw dragged his gaze away from Oakstar and nodded too.

"Where is Patchpaw?" asked Frostfur.

"She's in her nest already," replied Sandpaw.

"Good. Leave her to sleep. You can fetch herbs for her," meowed Frostfur. "Rest well. You leave at dawn." He flicked his tail and walked back to Oakstar's den.

"Well, then," mewed Firepaw. "You'd better go and see Spottedleaf."

Sandpaw listened for sourness in her voice, but there was none. There was no time for jealousy now. All the cats in the Clan seemed to be united against the threat from Shadowclan.

Sandpaw and Silverpaw walked quickly towards Spottedleaf's den. The fern tunnel was dark. Not even the full moon penetrated its thick covering.

Spottedleaf seemed to be expecting them as they emerged into his moonlit clearing. "You have come for some traveling herbs," he meowed.

"Yes, please," Sandpaw answered. "And I think Raggedpelt needs more poppy seeds. She seemed to be feeling her wounds."

"I will take her some after you have gone. And your traveling herbs are ready."

Spottedleaf indicated a pile of carefully made leaf wraps. "Enough for the three of you. The dark green herb will stop your hunger pangs during the journey. The other will give you strength. Eat them both just before you leave. They're not as good as fresh prey, but the taste won't last long."

"Thanks, Spottedleaf," mewed Sandpaw. He leaned down and picked up one of the parcels. As he bent his head, Spottedleaf stretched over and gently rubbed his cheek with his nose. Sandpaw breathed in his sweet, warm scent and purred his thanks.

Silverpaw picked up the other two and the friends turned and headed back through the tunnel.

"Good luck!" Spottedleaf called after them. "Travel safely."

They arrived at the entrance to their den and dropped the bundles.

"Well, I just hope these herbs don't taste too revolting!" muttered Silverpaw.

"It must be a long way to the Moonstone. We've never been given herbs before. Do you know where it is?" Sandpaw asked.

"Beyond Clan territory, at a place called Highstones. It lies deep underground, in a cave called Mothermouth."

"Have you ever been there before?" Sandpaw was impressed that Silverpaw knew so much about this mysterious place.

"No, but all apprentices have to make the journey there before they become warriors."

The thought of becoming a warrior made Sandpaw's eyes gleam with excitement, and he couldn't help standing a little taller.

"Don't get your hopes up. We still have to finish our training!" Silverpaw warned, as if reading his thoughts.

Sandpaw looked up through the canopy of leaves at the stars glittering in the black sky above. Moonhigh had passed. "We should get some sleep," he mewed. But he couldn't imagine being able to sleep with the though of tomorrow's adventure spinning through his mind. Attending the Gathering, a journey to the Moonstone—how far away his kittypet life seemed now!

Chapter 14

The cold air chilled Sandpaw's bones as blackness wrapped itself around him. He could hear nothing, and his nostrils were filled with the musty scent of damp earth.

Out of nowhere, a brilliant ball of light flared in front of him. Sandpaw ducked his head, screwing up his eyes against the glare. The light shone, dazzling coldly like a star; then it blinked out, disappearing as quickly as it had come. The darkness fell away, and Sandpaw found himself in the forest. He felt comforted by the familiar smells of the woods. He breathed in the moist green scents, and calmness flowed through his body.

Without warning, a dreadful noise burst from the trees. Sandpaw's fur bristled. It was the screeching of terrified cats racing out from the bushes up ahead. Sandpaw recognized their Thunderclan pelts as they fled past him. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. Then came great cats, huge dark warriors, their eyes glittering cruelly. They thundered toward him, pounding the earth with massive paws, their claws unsheathed. And out of the shadows, Sandpaw heard a high, desperate cry filled with grief and rage. Silverpaw!

Sandpaw woke, horrified. His dream vanished, leaving his ears ringing and his fur standing on end. As he opened his eyes, he saw the face of Goldenflower peering into the den. Sandpaw leaped to his feet, instantly alert.

"Something wrong, Sandpaw?" asked Goldenflower.

"Just a dream," Sandpaw mumbled.

Goldenflower gave him a curious look, then growled, "Wake the others. We leave shortly."

Outside the den, the sky glowed with a new dawn, and dew

sparkled on the ferns. It would be a warm day once the dun was up, but the early-morning dampness reminded Sandpaw that the time of leaf-fall was not far off.

Sandpaw, Silverpaw, and Patchpaw quickly gulped down the herbs that Spottedleaf had given them. Goldenflower and Oakstar sat watching them, ready to leave. The rest of the camp was still asleep.

"Ugh!" complained Silverpaw. "I knew they'd be bitter. Why couldn't we eat a fat, juicy mouse instead?"

"These herbs will keep your hunger at bay longer," answered Oakstar. "And they will make you strong. We have a long journey ahead of us."

"Have you eaten yours already?" Sandpaw asked.

"I cannot eat if I'm going to share dreams with Starclan at the Moonstone tonight," replied Oakstar.

Sandpaw felt his paws tingle when he heard these words. He was itching to begin the journey. With the dawn's light and the familiar voices, the terror of his dream had left him. All that remained was the memory of the brilliant light, and Oakstar's words sent a renewed thrill of excitement through him.

The five cat made their way through the gorse tunnel and out of the camp.

Frostfur was just returning with a patrol. "Safe journey," he meowed.

Oakstar nodded. "I know I can trust you to keep the camp safe," she answered.

Frostfur looked at Silverpaw and dipped his head. "Remember," he meowed, "you are almost a warrior. Don't forget what I have taught you."

Silverpaw looked back at Frostfur with affection. "I will always remember, Frostfur," he mewed, nudging his head against the white

tom's flank.

They retraced their route to Fourtrees. This was the quickest way to pass into Windclan territory. Hightstones lay beyond.

As Sandpaw bounded down the side of the glade toward the Great Rock, he could still smell the scents of last night's Gathering. He followed the others through the grassy clearing and up the slope on the other side, into Windclan territory. The bushy slope became steeper as they climbed, and rockier, until the cats had to leap from boulder to boulder up the side of a craggy cliff face.

Sandpaw paused when they reached the top. Ahead of them, the ground flattened out into a wide plateau. The wind blew in a steady gust that rippled the grass and bent the trees. The soil was stony, and outcroppings of bare rock dotted the landscape here and there.

The air still carried the scents of Windclan, but they were stale. Much fresher, and more alarming, were the pungent markings of Shadowclan warriors.

"All Clans are entitled to safe passage to the Moonstone, but Shadowclan seems to have no respect for the warrior code anymore, so be alert," warned Oakstar. "We mustn't hunt outside our territory, though. We'll follow the warrior code, even if Shadowclan doesn't."

They set off across the plateau as the sun rose into the sky, following the tracks through the heather. Sandpaw had grown used to living under a canopy of trees. Without their shade, his sandy-colored pelt felt heavy and hot, and his back seemed to burn. He was thankful for the steady breeze blowing from the forests behind.

Suddenly Goldenflower stopped dead. "Watch out!" he hissed. "I smell a Shadowclan patrol."

Sandpaw and the others lifted their noses, and sure enough, the scent of Shadowclan warriors traveled on the wind.

"They are upwind. They won't know we are here is we keep moving," meowed Oakstar. "But we must hurry. If they move ahead they'll detect us. It's not far to the edge of Windclan territory now."

They moved on quickly, leaping over the rocks, pushing their way through the sweet-smelling heather. Every few steps, Sandpaw sniffed the air and glanced over his shoulder, on the lookout for the Shadowclan patrol. But gradually the odor grew fainter and fainter. *They must have turned back,* he thought with relief.

Finally they reached the edge of the uplands. The landscape changed dramatically, shaped and altered beyond recognition by Twolegs. Wide earth tracks crisscrossed green and golden meadows, small woods dotted the land, and Twoleg nests were scattered here and there among the fields. In the distance Sandpaw saw a familiar wide, gray path, and an acid tang that stung his throat drifted on the breeze.

"Is that the Thunderpath?" he asked Silverpaw.

"Yes," replied Silverpaw. "It runs up from Shadowclan territory. Can you see Highstones behind it?"

Sandpaw looked at the distant horizon. The land rose sharply up to a point, jagged and barren. "Do we have to cross the Thunderpath then?"

"Yep," mewed Silverpaw. His voice was strong and confident, almost cheerful, as he faced the difficult journey.

"Come on!" Oakstar meowed. She bounded forward. "We can be there by moonrise as long as we keep up the pace."

Sandpaw followed her with the others, down the hill, away from the bleak hunting grounds of Windclan and into the lush Twoleg territory.

Keeping near the hedges, the cats walked on. Once or twice Sandpaw could smell prey-scent from the bushes, but Spottedleaf's herbs had succeeded in taking the edge off his hunger. The sun was still hot on his back, even in the shadows of the hedgerows.

They skirted a Twoleg nest. It stood on a wide expanse of hard white stone, with smaller nests round the edges. Keeping low, the cats crept past the fence that surrounded the white stone. A sudden

barrage of barking and snarling made them spin around.

Dogs! Sandpaw's heart missed a beat. He arched his back, fur bristling from nose to tail.

Goldenflower peered through the fence. "It's all right. They're tied up!" he hissed.

Sandpaw looked at the two dogs scrabbling on the stone barely ten tail-lengths away. They were nothing like the pampered pets that lived in the gardens of the Twolegplace. These creatures stared at him with wild, killing eyes. They strained at their ties and reared up on their hind legs. They growled and barked, their lips drawn back to reveal huge teeth, until the shout of an unseen Twoleg silenced them. The cats moved on.

The sun was beginning to sink by the time they reached the Thunderpath. Oakstar signaled to them to stop and wait beneath a hedge. His eyes and throat stinging from the fumes, Sandpaw watched as the great monsters flashed to and fro in front of him.

"We'll go one at a time," meowed Goldenflower. "Patchpaw, you first."

"No, Goldenflower," Oakstar interrupted. "I will go first. Don't forget, this will be the first time of crossing for the apprentices. Let them see how it is done."

Sandpaw stared at his leader as she padded to the edge of the Thunderpath and looked up and down. She waited calmly as one monster after another flew past her, ruffling her fur. Then, when the earsplitting roar paused for a moment, she raced across to the other side.

"Off you go, Patchpaw; now you've seen how it's done," meowed Goldenflower.

Sandpaw saw Patchpaw's eyes widen with fear. He knew just how his friend felt. He could smell his own fear-scent. The small black and white cat crept forward to the edge of the road. It was quiet, but Patchpaw hesitated.

"Go!" hissed Goldenflower from the hedge. Sandpaw saw Patchpaw's muscles tighten as she prepared to run. Then the ground began to tremble beneath his paws. A monster sped out of the distance and hurtled past. The black and white cat shrank back for a moment, then pelted over to join Oakstar. A monster coming in the other direction threw dust up where her paws had been just a heartbeat before. Sandpaw felt his fur shiver and he took a deep breath to calm himself.

Silverpaw was lucky. A long lull let him cross safely. Then it was Sandpaw's turn.

"Go on, then," growled Goldenflower. Sandpaw looked from Goldenflower to the Thunderpath, and then walked out from beneath the hedge. He waited at the edge, as Oakstar had done. A monster was rushing toward him. Sandpaw looked at the approaching monster. *After this one,* he thought, and waited for it to pass. Suddenly his heart lurched as he realized the monster had veered off the Thunderpath and was bumping along the grass. It was heading straight for him! A Twoleg was jeering from an opening in its side. Sandpaw leaped backward, claws out, battered by the storm of wind from the Twoleg monster as it roared past him only a whisker away. He crouched, trembling, in the dirt and stared as it swerved back onto the path and disappeared into the distance. Through the roaring of blood in his ears, Sandpaw realized the Thunderpath was quiet again, and he raced across, running faster than he had ever done in his life.

"I thought you were fresh-kill!" cried Silverpaw as Sandpaw cannoned into him, almost knocking him over.

"Me too!" Sandpaw gasped. He was trying to stop shaking. He turned back to watch Goldenflower dart over the path toward them.

"Twolegs!" he spat as he arrived at their side.

"Do you want to rest before we go on?" Oakstar asked Sandpaw.

Sandpaw looked up. The sun was low in the sky. "No," he answered. "I'm okay." But he had leaped so frantically out of the monster's way that his claws felt frayed and tender.

The cats carried on, with Oakstar in the lead. The earth was darker on this side of the Thunderpath and the grass felt coarser underpaw. As they approached the foot of Highstones, the grass gave way to bare, rocky soil, dotted with patches of heather. The land sloped up now, toward the sky. Craggy rocks topped the slope, blazing orange in the sun.

Bluestar stopped once more. She chose a sun-warmed rock to sit upon, flat and wide enough for all five cats to rest side by side.

"Look," she meowed, tilting her nose toward the dark slope before them. "Mothermouth."

Sandpaw peered upward. The glare of the setting sun blinded him, and the slope was engulfed in shadow.

The cats waited in silence. Gradually, as the sun dropped down behind Highstones, Sandpaw began to make out the cave entrance, a square black hole that yawned darkly beneath a stone archway.

"We'll wait here until the moon is higher," meowed Oakstar. "You should hunt if you are hungry and then get some rest."

Sandpaw was pleased to have a chance to find food. He was starving now. Silverpaw clearly felt the same and leaped away into a clump of heather, following the prey-scent that was thick in the air. Sandpaw and Patchpaw followed him. Goldenflower set off in the opposite direction, but Oakstar remained where she was. She sat still and silent, gazing unblinkingly at Mothermouth.

The three apprentices gathered plenty of fresh-kill. With Goldenflower they crouched on the stony hillside and feasted. But in spite of their easy hunt, no cat said much, and the air still felt thick with tension and anticipation.

Afterward, the cats rested beside their leader until the warmth had seeped out of the rock on which they lay and cold black shadows reached up on all sides. Only then did Oakstar call out, "Come. It is time."

Chapter 15

Oakstar stood and began to pad toward Mothermouth. Goldenflower walked beside her, matching her strides step for step.

"Come on, Patchpaw!" called Silverpaw. Patchpaw was still sitting on the rock, staring up at the rocks. At Silverpaw's mew, she stood and began to follow slowly. Sandpaw realized his friend had hardly said a word the whole journey. *Is she just worried about Shadowclan, or is there something else troubling her?* Sandpaw wondered.

It took the cats only a few moments to reach Mothermouth. Sandpaw stood on the threshold and peered inside. The blackness beyond the stone archway was darker than the cloudiest night. Sandpaw narrowed his eyes, trying to see where the tunnel led, but he couldn't see a thing.

Beside him, Silverpaw and Patchpaw craned their heads nervously around the entrance. Even Goldenflower seemed unsettled by the black hole ahead of them. "How will we find our way in such darkness?" he asked.

"I will know the way," answered Oakstar. "Just follow my scent. Patchpaw and Silverpaw, you will remain on guard outside. Sandpaw, you will accompany me and Goldenflower to the Moonstone."

Sandpaw felt a thrill jolt through him. What an honor! Sandpaw glanced sideways at Goldenflower. The warrior sat with his chin boldly raised, but Sandpaw could detect a subtle fear-scent coming from him. It grew stronger as Oakstar stepped forward into the blackness.

Goldenflower shook his mighty head and padded after Oakstar. With a brief nod to the other apprentices, Sandpaw followed.

Inside the cave, his eyes still detected nothing. The complete and

utter blackness felt strange, but he was surprised to find that he wasn't frightened. His eagerness to discover what lay ahead was stronger.

The cold, damp air reached through his thick fur and into his bones, stiffening his muscles. Even the coldest nights did not hold the same chill as the air here. *This ground has never known the warmth of the sun,* thought Sandpaw, feeling the rock smooth like ice beneath his paws. Freezing air filled his lungs with each breath, until he felt light-headed.

He followed Oakstar and Goldenflower through the darkness, judging his way by scent and feel alone. They were walking along a tunnel that sloped down and down, winding first one way and then the other. Sandpaw's whiskers brushed the side of the cave, telling him where to walk and where to turn. His nose told him that Oakstar and Goldenflower were only a tail-length ahead of him.

On and on they went. *How far have we come?* Sandpaw wondered. Then he felt a tingle in his whiskers. The air in his nostrils seemed fresher than before. He sniffed again, relieved to smell the familiar world above. He could smell peat, and prey, and the scent of heather. There must be a hole somewhere in the roof of the tunnel. "Where are we?" he mewed into the darkness.

"We have entered the cavern of the Moonstone," came Oakstar's soft reply. "Wait here. It will be moonhigh soon."

Sandpaw folded his hind legs under him on the chilly stone floor and waited. He could hear the steady breathing of Oakstar and the more rapid, fear-scented panting of Goldenflower.

Suddenly, in a flash more blinding than the setting sun, the cave was lit up. Sandpaw's eyes were wide open after the blackness of the tunnel. He closed them quickly against the cold, white light. The slowly he opened them into tiny slits and peered ahead.

He saw a gleaming rock, which glittered as if it were made from countless dewdrops. *The Moonstone!* Sandpaw looked around. In the cold light reflected from the stone, he could make out the shadowy edges of a high-roofed cavern. The Moonstone rose up from the

middle of the floor, three tail-lengths high.

Oakstar was staring upward, her fur bleached white in the glow of the Moonstone. Even Goldenflower's pale pelt shone silver. Sandpaw followed Oakstar's gaze. High in the roof was an opening that revealed a narrow triangle of night sky. The moon was casting a beam of light through the hole, down onto the Moonstone, making it sparkle like a star.

Beside him, Sandpaw smelled Goldenflower's fear-scent growing, until it became overpowering. Sandpaw felt startled. Could the warrior see something else here, something dangerous? He saw a flash of movement, felt fur rush past him, and heard the fleeing pawsteps of Goldenflower racing back to the entrance.

"Sandpaw?" Oakstar's voice was quiet and calm.

"I'm still here," he answered nervously. What had frightened Goldenflower?

"Oakstar?" Sandpaw mewed again when she didn't answer. His heart was beating fast, making the blood roar in his ears.

"It is all right, young warrior; don't be afraid," Oakstar murmured. Her calm voice settled him a little. "I think Goldenflower was surprised by the power of the Moonstone. In the world above, Goldenflower is a fearless and mighty warrior, but down here, where the spirits of Starclan speak, a cat needs a different kind of strength. What do you feel, Sandpaw?"

Sandpaw sniffed the air deeply, and forced his body to relax. "Only my own curiousity," he admitted.

"That is good," Oakstar replied.

Sandpaw looked back at the Moonstone. His eyes had gotten used to its light and he was no longer dazzled. Instead, it soothed him. With a twitch of his tail, he remembered his dream. This was the brilliant ball of light he had seen!

Spellbound, Sandpaw watched as Oakstar padded up to the stone and lay down beside it. She reached her head forward and touched

the Moonstone with her nose. Her amber eyes sparkled with its reflection for a moment before she closed them. Now she rested her head on her paws, her eyelids flickering, her paws twitching occasionally. *Was she sleeping?* Then Sandpaw remembered Silverpaw's words: *new leaders have to sleep near the stone, and as they sleep, they have special dreams.*

He waited. The chill was not so intense here, but still he found himself shivering. He had no idea how much time had passed, but suddenly the rock stopped glowing. The cavern was plunged into darkness once more. Sandpaw looked up to the opening in the roof of the cavern. The moon had passed on, out of sight. All that remained were tiny stars shimmering in blackness.

Sandpaw could just make out the pale shape of his leader, lying beside the Moonstone. He wanted to call out her name, but did not dare break the silence.

After more endless moments, she spoke to him. "Sandpaw? Are you still there?" Her voice sounded remote and agitated.

"Yes, Oakstar." Sandpaw heard Oakstar's pawsteps approaching.

"Hurry," she hissed. He felt her fur brush past him. "We must return to camp."

Sandpaw raced after her, astonished by the speed with which she rushed through the blackness. He followed her scent blindly, up and up the stone tunnel, until she led him safely back to the outside world.

Goldenflower was waiting at the opening beside Silverpaw and Patchpaw as Oakstar and Sandpaw climbed out of the cave. His expression was cold and his fur was slightly ruffled, but he sat motionless and dignified.

"Goldenflower." Oakstar greeted him but did not mention the warrior cat's flight from the depths.

Goldenflower relaxed a little. "What did you learn?"

"We must return to camp immediately," Oakstar meowed briefly.

Sandpaw saw a look of desperation in his leader's eyes. Now the horror of his dream forced its way back into his memory; the fleeing cats; the great, dark warriors; the ear-splitting wail of distress. Sandpaw tried to ignore the cold fear that gripped his muscles, and followed Oakstar away from Mothermouth. Was his nightmare vision about to come true?

Chapter 16

They headed back the way they had come. The moon had disappeared behind a bank of clouds. It was dark, but at least the Thunderpath was quieter now. The only monster they heard was far off in the distance. The cats crossed the path together and pushed their way through the hedge on the other side.

Sandpaw could feel his muscles growing stiff with tiredness as they hurried on. Oakstar kept up a swift pace with her nose thrust forward and her tail high. Goldenflower loped beside her. Sandpaw followed a few paces behind with Silverpaw, but Patchpaw was flagging.

"Keep up, Patchpaw!" Goldenflower growled over his shoulder.

Patchpaw flinched and bounded forward until she caught up with Sandpaw and Silverpaw.

"Are you okay?" Sandpaw asked.

"Yes," Patchpaw panted, not meeting Sandpaw's eyes. "Just a bit tired."

They scrambled down a deep ditch and up the other side.

"What did Goldenflower say when he came out of the cave?" Sandpaw meowed, trying not to sound too curious.

"He wanted to check that we were still guarding the entrance," replied Silverpaw. "Why?"

Sandpaw hesitated. "Did you scent anything strange about him?" he asked.

"Only that damp old cave," Silverpaw mewed, looking surprised.

"He seemed a little edgy," ventured Patchpaw.

"He wasn't the only one!" Silverpaw meowed, looking at the black and white cat.

"What do you mean?" asked Patchpaw.

"Just that the fur on your neck stands up whenever you see him these days," whispered Silverpaw. "You nearly jumped out of your skin when he came out of the cave."

"He just surprised me, that's all," Patchpaw protested. "You have to admit, it was a bit creepy by Mothermouth."

"I suppose so," agreed Silverpaw.

The cats slipped under a hedge into a cornfield that glowed silver in the moonlight, and followed the ditch that ran around its edge.

"So what was it like inside, Sandpaw?" Silverpaw demanded. "Did you see the Moonstone?"

"Yes, I did. It was amazing!" Sandpaw felt his fur tingle at the memory.

Silverpaw shot him an admiring glance. "So it's true! The rock really does shine underground."

Sandpaw didn't reply. He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the image of the Moonstone that dazzled his mind. Then pictures from his dream crowded into his head, and his eyes shot open. Oakstar was right: they had to get back to camp as quickly as they could.

Ahead, Goldenflower and Oakstar had leaped through a fence, out of the cornfield. The apprentices followed, squeezing under the fence onto an earth track. It was the path that led past the Twoleg nest and the dogs. Sandpaw looked up and saw Oakstar and Goldenflower trotting tirelessly together, silhouetted against a skyline tinged with red. The sun would be rising soon.

"Look!" he called to Silverpaw and Patchpaw. An unfamiliar cat had jumped out in front of the two warriors.

"It's a loner!" hissed Silverpaw. The three apprentices hurried

forward.

The stranger was a small black she-cat, shorter than the warriors, but well muscled.

"This is Raven," Oakstar explained to the apprentices as they caught up. "She lives near this Twoleg nest."

"Hi!" meowed the cat. "I haven't seen any of your Clan for some moons. How are you, Oakstar?"

"I'm well, thank you," replied Oakstar. "And you, Raven? How's the prey been running since we last passed this way?"

"Not so bad," replied Raven, with an amiable gleam in her eye. "One good thing about Twolegs—you'll always find plenty of rats nearby." The black she-cat went on: "You seem in more of a hurry than usual. Is everything all right?"

Goldenflower looked at Raven. A growl rumbled deep in his chest. Sandpaw could sense that the warrior was suspicious of the loner's curiosity.

"I don't like to be away from my Clan too long," Oakstar answered smoothly.

"As always, Oakstar, you are tied to your Clan like a queen to her kits." observed Raven, not unkindly.

"What is it you want, Raven?" asked Goldenflower.

Raven flashed him a reproachful look. "I just wanted to warn you that there are two dogs here now. You'd be safer going back into the cornfield instead of past the yard."

"We know about the dogs. We saw them earlier—" Goldenflower began impatiently.

"We are grateful to you for the warning," interrupted Oakstar. "Thank you, Raven. Until next time..."

Raven flicked her tail. "Have a safe journey," she meowed as she

bounded away up the track.

"Come," ordered Oakstar. She pushed her way through the long grass between the path and the fence that led back into the cornfield. The three apprentices followed, but Goldenflower hesitated.

"You trust the word of a loner?" he meowed.

Oakstar stopped and turned to face him. "Would you rather face those dogs?"

"They were tied up when we passed them earlier." Goldenflower pointed out.

"They may be united now. We're going this way," meowed Oakstar. She ducked under the fence into the field. Sandpaw slipped after her, followed by Silverpaw, Patchpaw, and finally Goldenflower.

By now, the sun had lifted its head above the horizon. The hedgerows sparkled with dew, promising another warm day.

The cats padded along the edge of the ditch. Sandpaw looked down into the deep gully, steep-sided and filled with nettles. Sandpaw could smell prey-scent. There was something familiar about the bitter odor, but it was one he hadn't smelled for a long time.

An earsplitting squeal made Sandpaw whip around. Patchpaw was struggling and clawing at the earth. Something had hold of her leg and was dragging her down into the ditch.

"Rats!" spat Goldenflower. "Raven has sent us into a trap!"

Before they could react, all five cats were surrounded. Huge brown rats swarmed out of the ditch, squeaking shrilly. Sandpaw could see their sharp front teeth glinting in the early dawn light.

Suddenly one leaped onto Sandpaw's shoulder. Fiery pain shot through his shoulder as the rat sank its teeth into his flesh. Another grasped his leg between its powerful jaws.

Sandpaw flung himself down and writhed madly, trying to shake

free. He knew the rats were not as strong as he was, but there were so many of them. Yowls, hisses, and spits told him that the others were also being attacked.

Sandpaw slashed fiercely with his claws, slicing out at a rat that held on to his leg. It let go, but another one gripped his tail. Fast as lightning, powered by fear and rage, Sandpaw fought and hacked at his attackers. Twisting his head around, he sank his teeth into the rat that had embedded itself into his shoulders. He felt the bones of its neck crunch in his mouth and its body go limp, before it fell away onto the dirt track.

Sandpaw gasped with pain as yet another rat leaped onto his back and sank its teeth in. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of black fur. For a moment he was confused, then he felt the rat being dragged off him. Sandpaw spun around to see Raven flinging the rodent into the ditch.

Without hesitating, Raven glanced around and sprinted over to Oakstar. She was writhing on the path, covered in rats. In a flash Raven had the spine of one between her teeth and was plucking it off her with practiced ease. She spat it onto the ground and grabbed another in her mouth as Oakstar thrashed beneath her.

Sandpaw rushed over to Silverpaw, who was being attacked from both sides by two smaller rats. Sandpaw lunged at the nearest one, giving it a bite that left it dead. Silverpaw managed to turn and pin down the other with his claws. He grabbed it with his teeth and flung it into the ditch as hard as he could. It did not come back.

"They're running away!" Goldenflower yowled.

Sure enough, the remaining rats were fleeing down into the safety of the ditch. Sandpaw could hear the scrabbling of small paws disappearing into the nettles. The bites in his shoulder and hind leg stung sharply. He licked carefully at his fur, wet and matted with blood, its sharp tang mingling with the stench of the rats.

Sandpaw looked around for Patchpaw. Silverpaw was standing at the edge of the nettles, mewing encouragement as Patchpaw pulled herself out of the ditch, muddy and stung. A young rat was still

hanging on to her tail. Sandpaw bounded over and finished it off quickly while Silverpaw helped to pull Patchpaw over the top of the ditch.

Now Sandpaw looked for Oakstar. He saw Raven first, standing at the top of the ditch, scanning the depths for more rats. Oakstar was lying on the path nearby. Alarmed, Sandpaw dashed to his leader's side. The thick reddish-brown fur at the back of her neck was drenched with blood. "Oakstar?" he mewed.

Oakstar did not reply.

A furious yowl made Sandpaw look up.

Goldenflower leaped on top of Raven and pinned her to the ground. "You sent us into a trap!" he snarled.

"I didn't know the rats were here!" spat Raven, her paws scrabbling in the dust as she struggled to stand up.

"Why did you send us this way?" hissed Goldenflower.

"The dogs!"

"The dogs were tied when we passed them earlier!"

"The Twoleg unties them at night. They guard his nest," Raven panted, wheezing under the weight of Goldenflower's massive paws.

"Goldenflower! Oakstar is injured!" Sandpaw burst out.

Goldenflower released Raven at once. Raven got up and shook the dust from her coat. The great warrior bounded over to Oakstar's side and sniffed her wounds.

"Is there anything we can do?" Sandpaw asked.

"She is in the paws of Starclan now," meowed Goldenflower solemnly, stepping back.

Sandpaw opened his eyes wide with shock. Did Goldenflower mean that Oakstar was dead? His fur prickled as he looked down at his

leader. Is this what the spirits at the Moonstone had warned her about?

Silverpaw and Patchpaw had joined them and stood beside their leader, horror-struck. Raven hung back, craning her neck to see what was happening.

Oakstar's eyes were open but glazed, and her reddish-brown body lay motionless. She didn't even appear to be breathing.

"Is she dead?" whispered Patchpaw.

"I don't know. We must wait and see," replied Goldenflower.

The five cats waited in silence as the sun began to climb into the sky. Sandpaw found himself wordlessly begging Starclan to protect his leader, to send her back to them.

Then Oakstar stirred. The end of her tail twitched and she lifted her head.

"Oakstar?" mewed Sandpaw, his voice trembling.

"It's all right," Oakstar rasped. "I am still here. I have lost a life, but it wasn't my ninth."

Joy flooded Sandpaw. He looked at Goldenflower, expecting to see relief on his face, but the pale warrior was expressionless.

"Right," Goldenflower meowed in a commanding tone. "Patchpaw, fetch cobwebs for Oakstar's wounds. Silverpaw, find marigold or horsetail." The two apprentices dashed away. "Raven, I think you should leave us now."

Sandpaw looked over to the loner who had fought so bravely to help them. He wanted to thank her, but under Goldenflower's fierce gaze, he didn't dare. Instead of speaking, Sandpaw gave Raven a tiny nod. Raven seemed to understand, for she nodded in return and left without another word.

Oakstar was still lying on the dirt track. "Is everyone all right?" she asked hoarsely.

Goldenflower nodded.

Patchpaw came charging back, her left forepaw wrapped in a thick wad of cobwebs. "Here," she mewed.

"Should I put them on her wounds?" Sandpaw asked Goldenflower. "Raggedpelt showed me how."

"Very well," agreed Goldenflower. He walked away and scanned the ditch again, his ears pricked for more rats.

Sandpaw peeled a clump of cobwebs onto Oakstar's wounds.

She winced under his touch. "If it had not been for Goldenflower, those rats would have eaten me alive," she murmured, her voice tight with pain.

"It wasn't Goldenflower who saved you. It was Raven," Sandpaw whispered as he took some more cobwebs from Patchpaw.

"Raven?" Oakstar sounded surprised. "Is she here?"

"Goldenflower sent her away," Sandpaw answered quietly. "He think Raven sent us into a trap."

"And what do you think?" Oakstar rasped.

Sandpaw didn't look up, but concentrated on pressing the last bit of cobweb into place. "Raven is a loner. What would she gain by sending us into a trap only to rescue us from it?" he mewed eventually.

Oakstar laid down her head and closed her eyes again.

Silverpaw returned with some horsetail. Sandpaw chewed the leaves and spat the juice onto Oakstar's wounds. He knew it would help stop infection, but he still wished Spottedleaf were with him, with his knowledge of herbs and confidence in healing.

"We should rest here while Oakstar recovers," announced Goldenflower, padding up.

"No," Oakstar insisted. "We must return to the camp." Narrowing her eyes in pain, she struggled to her paws. "Let's keep going."

The Thunderclan leader limped along the edge of the field. Goldenflower walked at her side, his face dark with unknowable thoughts. The apprentices exchanged anxious glances, and then followed.

"It is a long time since I saw you lose a life, Oakstar." Sandpaw overheard Goldenflower's whispered words. "How many have you lost now?"

Sandpaw couldn't help feeling surprised at Goldenflower's open curiosity.

"That was my fifth," replied Oakstar quietly.

Sandpaw strained his ears, but Goldenflower did not reply. He padded on, lost in thought.

Chapter 17

Sunhigh came and went as the cats made their way through Windclan's old hunting grounds. Their heavy silence showed that they were still sore after the rat fight. Sandpaw felt scratched and bitten all over. He could see Silverpaw was limping, occasionally hopping on three legs to protect his injured back leg. But it was Oakstar who worried him most. Her pace was even slower now, but she refused to stop and rest. The grim look on her face, clouded by pain, told Sandpaw how much she wanted to reach the Thunderclan camp.

"Don't worry about Shadowclan warriors," she meowed through gritted teeth as Goldenflower paused to sniff the air. "You won't find any here today."

How could she be so sure? Sandpaw wondered.

They picked their way carefully down the steep, rocky hillside that led to Fourtrees and joined the familiar trail that led home. It was late afternoon, and Sandpaw began to think longingly of his nest, and a plump helping of fresh-kill.

"I can still smell the stench of Shadowclan," Silverpaw muttered to Sandpaw as they trekked through Thunderclan's hunting grounds.

"Perhaps the breeze has carried it down from Windclan's territory," Sandpaw suggested. He could smell it too, and his whiskers were trembling.

Suddenly Patchpaw stopped. "Can you hear that?" she mewed in a hushed voice.

Sandpaw strained his ears. At first he heard only the familiar sounds of the forest—leaves rustling, a pigeon calling. Then his blood ran cold. In the distance he could hear battle-hungry yowls, and the shrill squeal of terrified kits.

"Quick!" Oakstar howled. "It is as Starclan warned me. Our camp is being attacked!" She tried to leap forward, but stumbled. She pushed herself up and limped onward.

Goldenflower and Sandpaw pelted forward side by side. Silverpaw and Patchpaw followed, their tail fur bristled to twice its usual size. Sandpaw fought his soreness as he charged toward the camp. His only concern was to protect the Clan.

The sounds of battle grew louder and louder as he neared the camp entrance, and the stench of Shadowclan filled his nostrils. He was right behind Goldenflower as the cats dashed through the tunnel and into the clearing.

They were met by a frenzy of fighting, Thunderclan cats battling furiously with Shadowclan warriors. The kits were out of sight, and Sandpaw hoped they were safely hidden in the nursery. He guessed the weakest elders would be sheltering inside the hollow trunk of their fallen tree.

Every corner of the camp seemed alive with warriors. Sandpaw could see Lionheart and Patchpelt clawing and biting at a huge gray she-cat. Even the young white queen Whitestorm was fighting, though she was very close to kitting. Darkstripe was locked in a fierce tussle with a black warrior. Two of the elders, Speckletail and Halftail were nipping bravely at a tortoiseshell who fought with twice their speed and ferocity.

The returning cats hurled themselves into the battle. Sandpaw caught hold of a tabby warrior, much larger than him, and sank his teeth deep into his leg. He yowled with pain and turned on him, lashing out with sharp claws and lunging at his neck with his teeth bared. He twisted and ducked to avoid his bite. He couldn't match his speed, and he managed to grasp him from behind and pull him down into the dirt. With his strong hind legs, he clawed at his back till he squealed and struggled away from him, running headlong into the thick undergrowth that surrounded the camp.

Sandpaw glanced around to see that Oakstar had arrived. Despite her injuries, she was fighting another tabby. Sandpaw had never seen her fight before, but even wounded, she was a powerful

opponent. Her victim struggled to escape but she held her tightly and clawed her so fiercely that Sandpaw knew she would bear the scars of this fight for many moons.

Then he saw a white Shadowclan cat with jet-black paws dragging a Thunderclan elder away from the nursery. Sandpaw remembered those unusual dark paws from the Gathering. Blackfoot! The Shadowclan deputy made quick work of killing the elder, who had been guarding the kits, and began to reach into the bramble nest with one massive paw. The kits were squealing and mewling, undefended now as their mothers wrestled with other Shadowclan warriors in the clearing.

Sandpaw prepared to spring toward the nursery, but a claw sliced painfully down his side and he whipped around to see a scrawny tortoiseshell leap on top of him. As he slammed into the ground, he tried to call out to the other Thunderclan cats that the kits were in danger. Fighting with all his strength to escape the tortoiseshell's grip, he wrenched his head around so he could see the bramble nest.

Blackfoot had scooped two kits from their bedding already and was reaching in for a third.

Sandpaw saw no more as the tortoiseshell raked his belly with his hind claws. Sandpaw scrambled onto his feet and crouched low, as if in defeat. The trick had worked before and it worked now. As the tortoiseshell gripped him triumphantly and began to sink his teeth into Sandpaw's neck, Sandpaw sprang upward as hard as he could and flung the warrior away. He spun around and was on the winded warrior in an instant. This time he showed no mercy, plunging his teeth deep into the cat's shoulder. The bite sent the tom howling into the undergrowth.

Sandpaw jumped up, dashed over to the nursery, and thrust his head through the nursery entrance. Blackfoot was nowhere to be seen. Inside the nest, crouching over the terrified kits, was Raggedpelt. Her dark brown tabby fur was spattered with blood, and one of her eyes was painfully swollen. She looked up at Sandpaw with a ferocious hiss, then, realizing it was him, she yowled, "They're okay. I'll protect them."

Sandpaw looked at her as she calmed the helpless kits, and Brokenstar's dire warning about the Shadowclan rogue flashed through his mind. He didn't have time to think about that now. He would have to trust Raggedpelt. He nodded quickly and ducked back out of the brambles.

There were now only a few Shadowclan cats left in the camp. Patchpaw and Silverpaw were fighting side by side, lashing out at a black she-cat until she fled howling into the bushes. Brindleface and Darkstripe chased the last two intruders out of the camp, sending them off with a few extra scratches and bites.

Sandpaw sat down, exhausted, and stared around the camp. It was devastated. Blood spattered the clearing, and tufts of fur drifted in the dust. The surrounding wall of undergrowth was ripped open where the invaders had crashed through.

One by one, the Thunderclan cats gathered beneath the Highrock. Silverpaw came to sit by him, his sides heaving and blood trickling from a torn ear. Patchpaw flopped down and began to lick a wound on her tail. The queens ran to the nursery to check on their kits. Sandpaw found himself waiting tensely for their return, his view blocked by the other cats. He relaxed when he heard squeals and purrs of joy coming from the bramble nest.

Lionheart wove her way back through the crowd, followed by Raggedpelt. The golden tabby queen stepped forward and addressed them. "Our kits are all safe, thanks to Raggedpelt. A Shadowclan warrior killed brave Rosetail and was trying to steal them from their nest, but Raggedpelt fought her off."

"It was no ordinary Shadowclan warrior either," Sandpaw put in. He was determined to let the Clan know how much they owed Raggedpelt. "I saw her. It was Blackfoot."

"The Shadowclan deputy!" meowed Whitestorm, who had fought so bitterly to protect the unborn kits in her swollen belly.

There was a stir at the edge of the group, as Oakstar limped forward and made her way over to the apprentices. The grave expression on her face was enough to tell Sandpaw that something was wrong.

"Spottedleaf is with Frostfur," she murmured. "He was injured in the battle. It looks bad." She turned her head toward the shadow on the far side of the Highrock where the warrior lay, a motionless bundle of dusty white fur.

A high-pitched wail rose from Silverpaw's throat and he raced over to Frostfur. Spottedleaf, who had been leaning over the Thunderclan deputy, stepped back to let the young apprentice share tongues for the last time with his mentor. As Silverpaw's howl of grief echoed around the clearing, Sandpaw's fur tingled and his blood ran cold. It was the cry he had heard in his dream! For a moment his head swam; then he gave himself a shake. He had to keep calm, for Silverpaw's sake.

Sandpaw looked at Oakstar, who nodded, and he padded over to join his friend by the Highrock. He stopped for a moment beside Spottedleaf.

He looked exhausted and dull-eyed with grief. "I can't help Frostfur now," he mewed quietly to him. "He is on his way to join Starclan." He pressed his body against Sandpaw's side, and he felt comforted by the touch of his warm fur.

The other cats looked on in silence as the sun slowly set behind the trees. Finally Silverpaw sat up and cried out, "He's gone!" He lay down again beside Frostfur's body and rested his head on his front paws. The rest of the Clan walked silently forward to carry out their own grieving rituals for their beloved deputy.

Sandpaw joined them. He licked Frostfur's neck and murmured, "Thank you for your wisdom. You taught me so much." Then he sat down beside Silverpaw and began gently to groom his friend's ears.

Oakstar waited until the other cats had left before padding quietly up. Silverpaw didn't even seem to notice his leader's presence. Sandpaw looked away as Oakstar spoke her last words to her old friend.

"Oh, what am I going to do without you, Frostfur?" she whispered. Then she limped back to her den and crouched down outside, staring grief-stricken into the distance. She didn't even try to lick

clean her bloody, matted fur. It was the first time Sandpaw had seen her look utterly defeated, and he felt a chill run through him.

He sat with Silverpaw and Frostfur until the moon rose high. Patchpaw joined him and together they kept company with their grieving friend. Goldenflower strode over and briefly shared tongues with Frostfur. Sandpaw waited to hear what words he would share with his warrior friend, but Goldenflower remained silent as he licked the matted fur. To Sandpaw's confusion, the pale tabby's eyes seemed to be fixed on Patchpaw rather than the fallen deputy.

Spottedleaf padded lightly around the camp, tending to wounds and battered nerves. Sandpaw watched him approach Oakstar twice, but each time the leader sent him away to see to the others. Only when Spottedleaf had attended to the wounds of all the other cats did Oakstar allow him to treat her bites and scratches.

When he had finished, Spottedleaf turned and walked back to his den. Oakstar stood and slowly hauled herself up onto the Highrock. The Clan cats seemed to have been waiting for her. As soon as she had settled herself in her usual spot, they began to gather in the clearing below, unusually silent and somber-faced.

Sandpaw and Patchpaw got stiffly to their paws and joined them, leaving Silverpaw behind with Frostfur's body. The silver and black tabby apprentice was still lying with his nose resting against Frostfur's cooling white pelt. Sandpaw guessed Oakstar would excuse Silverpaw from the Clan meeting this time.

"It is nearly moonhigh," meowed Oakstar as Sandpaw slipped into place next to Patchpaw. "And it is once more my duty—much, much too soon—to name Thunderclan's new deputy." Her voice was tired and cracked with sadness.

Sandpaw looked from warrior to warrior. They were all looking expectantly at Goldenflower. Even Brindleface had turned to watch the pale tabby. From the bold expression on his face, and the way his whiskers twitched in anticipation, Goldenflower seemed to agree with them.

Oakstar took a deep breath and continued. "I say these words before the body of Frostfur, so that his spirit may hear and approve my choice." She hesitated. "I have not forgotten how one cat avenged the death of Redtail and brought her body back to us. Thunderclan needs this fearless loyalty even more now." Oakstar paused again and then meowed the name loud and clear. "Goldenflower will be the new deputy of Thunderclan."

There was a yowl of approval, with the loudest voices belonging to Darkstripe and Longtail. Brindleface sat calmly, his eyes closed, his tail wrapped neatly around him. He was nodding slowly and approvingly.

Goldenflower lifted his chin proudly, his eyes half-closed as he listened to the Clan. Then he stalked through the crowd, accepting tributes with the smallest of nods, and leaped up onto the Highrock beside Oakstar. "Thunderclan," he yowled, "I am honored to accept the position of Clan deputy. I never expected to gain such high rank, but by the spirit of Frostfur, I vow to serve you as best I can." He gravely dipped his head, fixing the crowd with his wide yellow eyes, and jumped down from the Highrock.

Sandpaw heard Patchpaw murmur, "Oh, no!" under her breath beside him. He turned to look curiously at his friend.

Patchpaw's head was hanging low. "She should never have chosen him!" she muttered.

"Are you talking about Goldenflower?" Sandpaw whispered.

"He's wanted to be deputy ever since he took care of Redtail—" Patchpaw mewed. She stopped abruptly.

"Took care of Redtail?" Sandpaw echoed. His mind suddenly raced with questions. What did Patchpaw know? At the Gathering, had her account of the battle with Riverclan been true? Was *Goldenflower* responsible for Redtail's death?

Chapter 18

"Are you telling Sandpaw how I protected Redtail?"

Sandpaw felt a cold shiver ruffle the fur on the back of his neck.

Patchpaw whipped around, eyes wide with fear. Goldenflower loomed over them, his lips drawn back in a menacing snarl.

Sandpaw jumped up and faced the new deputy. "She was just saying she wished you had been here to take care of Frostfur as well, that's all!" he mewed, thinking quickly.

Goldenflower looked from one to the other, then stalked away in silence. Patchpaw's blue eyes clouded with terror, and she started to tremble uncontrollably.

"Patchpaw?" Sandpaw meowed in alarm.

But Patchpaw didn't even look up at him. With her head held low, she slunk back to Silverpaw and crouched next to him, pressing her skinny black and white body next to Silverpaw's thick fur as if she was suddenly cold.

Sandpaw looked helplessly at his two friends as they huddled beside Frostfur's body. Not knowing what else to do, he padded over and settled himself beside them, ready to sit out the night.

As the moon passed overhead, other cats came to join their vigil. Oakstar arrived last, once the camp was calm and quiet. She said nothing, but sat a little way off, gazing at her dead deputy with an expression of such unbearable grief that Sandpaw had to look away.

At dawn, a group of elders came to take Frostfur's body away to the burial place. Silverpaw followed to help dig the hole where the great warrior would rest.

Sandpaw yawned and stretched. He felt chilled to the bone. Leaf-fall

was nearly here now, and the woods were clouded with mist, but above the leaves Sandpaw saw a rosy morning sky. He watched Silverpaw disappear into the dew-soaked undergrowth with the elders.

Patchpaw jumped to her paws and hurried back to the apprentices' den. Sandpaw followed her slowly. By the time he arrived, the black and white cat was curled up with her nose tucked under her tail, as if asleep.

Sandpaw was too exhausted to speak. He circled around on his mossy bed and then settled down for a long sleep.

"Wake up!"

Sandpaw heard Fernpaw's voice calling through the den entrance. He opened his eyes. Patchpaw was already awake, sitting bolt upright with her ears pricked. Silverpaw was stirring beside her. Sandpaw was surprised to see the familiar silver shape. He hadn't heard him come back after burying Frostfur.

"Oakstar's called another meeting." Fernpaw hissed at them and ducked out of the ferns.

The three apprentices crawled out of the warm den. The sun was already past its height, and the air felt cooler than before. Sandpaw shivered, and his belly growled. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten, and he wondered briefly if he would have a chance to hunt today.

Sandpaw, Silverpaw, and Patchpaw hurried to join the crowd gathered below the Highrock.

Goldenflower was speaking from his position beside Oakstar. "During the battle, our leader lost another life. Now that she has only four of her nine lives left, I am going to appoint a bodyguard to stay at her side constantly. No cat will be allowed to approach her unless the guards are present." His yellow eyes flicked to Patchpaw and then back to the rest of the crowd. "Darkstripe and Longtail," he continued, turning his gaze and the warriors. "You will act as Oakstar's guards.:

Darkstripe and Longtail nodded importantly, and sat taller.

Oakstar now spoke. Her voice sounded gentle and calming after her deputy's commanding yowl. "Thank you, Goldenflower, for your loyalty. But the Clan must understand that I am still here for them. No cat should hesitate to approach me, and I am happy to speak to anyone with or without my bodyguards." Her eyes darted briefly in Goldenflower's direction. "As the warrior code says, the safety of the Clan is more important than the security of any single member." She paused, and her amber gaze rested briefly on Sandpaw. "And now, I wish to invite Raggedpelt to join Thunderclan."

Meows of surprise rose from some of the warriors. Oakstar looked at Lionheart, who nodded her agreement. The other queens looked on silently.

Oakstar continued. "Her actions last night proved that she is brave and loyal. If she wishes it, we would welcome her as a full member of this Clan."

From her place at the edge of the crowd, Raggedpelt looked up at the Clan leader and murmured, "I am honored, Oakstar, and I accept your offer."

"Good." meowed Oakstar, her voice firm as if the matter was now closed.

Sandpaw purred with delight and nudged Silverpaw. He was surprised to realize just how much Oakstar's public show of trust in Raggedpelt meant to him.

Oakstar began to speak again. "Last night we successfully defended ourselves against Shadowclan, but they are still a great threat. The repair work we began this morning will continue. Our boundaries will be patrolled constantly. We must not assume that the war is over."

Goldenflower stood up, his tail held high, and glared down at the assembled cats. "Shadowclan attacked while we were away from camp," he growled. "They chose their moment well. How did they know that the camp was so poorly defeated? Do they have eyes

inside our camp?"

Sandpaw froze in horror as Goldenflower fixed his cold stare on Patchpaw. Some of the cats followed their new deputy's gaze and stared in puzzlement at the black and white apprentice. Patchpaw looked at the ground and shifted her paws nervously.

Goldenflower went on. "We still have a while before sunset. We must concentrate on rebuilding our camp. Meanwhile, if you suspect anything, or anyone, tell me. Be assured, anything you say will be in confidence." He nodded to dismiss the Clan then turned and began murmuring to Oakstar.

The cats separated and began to move around the camp, assessing damage and forming work groups.

"Patchpaw!" Sandpaw called, still shocked by Goldenflower's dark hint that his own apprentice had betrayed the Clan. But Patchpaw had already bounded away. Sandpaw could see her offering to help One-eye and Brindleface, before rushing off to collect twigs so they could patch the holes in the boundary wall. Patchpaw clearly didn't want to talk.

"Let's go and help her," suggested Silverpaw. His voice was flat and exhausted, and his eyes were dull.

"You go. I'll be there in a moment," Sandpaw answered. "First I want to check on Raggedpelt, see if she's okay after her fight with Blackfoot."

He looked for Raggedpelt in her nest by the fallen tree. She was stretched out in the shadows, her eyes thoughtful.

"Sandpaw," she purred when she saw him. "I'm glad you have come."

"I wanted to check that you were all right," Sandpaw mewed.

"Old habits stay longer than old scents, eh?" meowed Raggedpelt with a flash of her old spirit.

"I suppose so," Sandpaw confessed. "How are you feeling?"

"This old leg injury is playing up again, but I'll be fine," Raggedpelt told him.

"How did you manage to fight Blackfoot off?" Sandpaw asked, unable to keep the admiration out of his voice.

"Blackfoot's strong, but she's not a clever fighter. Fighting you was more of a challenge."

Sandpaw looked for the flicker of humor in the old cat's eyes, but there was none.

She continued, "I've known her since she was a kit. She hasn't changed—a bully, but no brains."

Sandpaw sat down beside her. "I'm not surprised Oakstar asked you to join the Clan," he purred. "You certainly showed your loyalty last night."

Raggedpelt twitched her tail. "Perhaps a truly loyal cat would have fought at the side of the Clan that raised her."

"But then I'd be fighting for my Twolegs!" Sandpaw pointed out.

Raggedpelt shot him an admiring glance. "Well said, youngster. But then, you have always been a thinker."

Sorrow pierced Sandpaw's heart as he remembered these were Frostfur's words too. "Do you miss Shadowclan?" he asked Raggedpelt.

Raggedpelt blinked slowly. "I miss the old Shadowclan," she meowed at last. "The way it used to be."

"Until Brokenstar became leader?" Sandpaw was curious.

"Yes," Raggedpelt admitted softly. "She changed the Clan." She gave a wheezy laugh. "She always knew how to give a good speech. She could make you believe a mouse was a rabbit if she set her mind to it. Perhaps that is why I was so blind to her faults." The old she-cat stared into the distance, lost in memories.

"Bet you can't guess who the new Shadowclan medicine cat is?" Sandpaw mewed, suddenly remembering what he had learned at the Gathering. It felt like moons ago now.

His words seemed to shake Raggedpelt back into the present. "Not Runningnose?" she meowed.

"Yep!"

Raggedpelt shook her head. "But she can't even cure her own cold!"

"That's what Silverpaw said!" They purred together for a moment, amused. Sandpaw got to his paws. "I'll leave you to rest now. Call me if you need anything else today."

Raggedpelt lifted her head. "Before you go, Sandpaw, I hear you were in a rat fight. Did they draw blood?"

"It's okay, Spottedleaf has treated my wounds with marigold."

"Sometimes marigold is not strong enough for rat bites. Go and find a patch of wild garlic to roll in. I think there's some not far from the camp entrance. That will draw out any poisons the rats may have left. Although," she added dryly, "Your denmates might not thank me for my advice!"

"Well, I do. Thanks, Raggedpelt!" Sandpaw purred.

"Go carefully, young one." Raggedpelt held his gaze for a moment, then let her chin rest on her front paws and closed her eyes.

Sandpaw slipped under the branches around Raggedpelt's nest and headed for the gorse tunnel, in search of the wild garlic. The sun was setting now, and he could hear the queens settling their kits for the night.

"Where do you think you're going?" growled a voice from the shadows. It was Darkstripe.

"Raggedpelt told me to go out and—"

"You don't take orders from that rogue!" hissed the warrior. "Go and

help with the repairs. No cat is to leave the camp tonight!" She lashed her tail from side to side.

"Yes, Darkstripe," Sandpaw mewed, dipping his head submissively. He turned and muttered "Dirtstripe!" under his breath, then headed toward the camp boundary, where he could see Silverpaw and Patchpaw busily patching a large hole in the wall of greenery.

"How's Raggedpelt?" asked Silverpaw as Sandpaw trotted up.

"She's fine. She said wild garlic would be good for my rat bites. I was on my way to find some, but Darkstripe ordered me to stay in camp," Sandpaw told him.

"Wild garlic?" mewed Silverpaw. "I wouldn't mind trying that. My leg still stings."

"I could sneak out and get some," Sandpaw offered. He had resented Darkstripe's offhand treatment and welcomed the chance to outwit her. "No one would notice if I slipped out of this hole here. It'd only take a couple of rabbit hops."

Patchpaw frowned, but Silverpaw nodded. "We'll cover for you," he whispered.

Sandpaw nuzzled him gratefully and jumped out through the tear in the boundary wall.

Once outside the camp, he began to make his way to the wild garlic patch, the sharp tang alerting him easily to its location. The moon was rising in the violet sky as the sun sank below the horizon. A cold breeze ruffled Sandpaw's fur. Suddenly he caught a cat-scent carried toward him on the wind. He sniffed cautiously. Shadowclan? No, just Goldenflower, and two other cats. He sniffed the air again. Darkstripe and Longtail! What were they doing here?

Curious, Sandpaw dropped into a stalking position. He prowled through the undergrowth paw by paw, keeping downwind so that he was not detected. The warriors were standing in the shadow of a clump of ferns, their heads very close together. Soon Sandpaw was near enough to hear them speak.

"Starclan knows, my apprentice has shown little promise from the start, but I never expected her to turn traitor!" growled Goldenflower.

Sandpaw's eyes widened and his fur prickled with shock. It sounded like Goldenflower intended to do more than just hint that Patchpaw had betrayed the Clan!

"How long did you say Patchpaw was missing on the journey to the Mothermouth?" asked Darkstripe.

"Long enough to have traveled to Shadowclan's camp and back," came the deputy's menacing answer.

The fur on Sandpaw's tail bristled angrily. *That's impossible!* He thought. *She was with us the whole time!*

Longtail's voice sounded now, high-pitched with excitement. "She must have told them that Thunderclan's leader and the strongest warrior had left the camp. Why else would they attack when they did?"

"We are the last Clan to stand against Shadowclan. We must remain strong." purred Goldenflower. His tone had become velvety soft now. He waited in silence for a response.

It was Darkstripe who answered, eagerly, as if she were still Goldenflower's apprentice, giving the correct answer to a question on hunting techniques. Her words made Sandpaw breathless with fear. "And the Clan would be better off without a traitor like Patchpaw."

"I have to say I agree with you, Darkstripe," murmured Goldenflower, his voice heavy with emotion. "Even though she's my own apprentice..." He trailed off as if he were too upset to say anymore.

Sandpaw had heard enough. Forgetting all about the wild garlic, he turned and crept as silently and as quickly as he could back toward the camp.

He decided not to tell Patchpaw what he had heard. She would be

terrified. Sandpaw's mind raced. What could he do? Goldenflower was the Clan deputy, a great warrior, and popular with all of the other cats. No one was going to listen to any accusations made by an apprentice. But Patchpaw was in terrible danger. Sandpaw shook himself, trying to clear his head. There was only one thing to do—he must tell what he had heard to Oakstar, and somehow convince her that he was telling the truth!

Chapter 19

Silverpaw and Patchpaw were still patching the hole when Sandpaw reached them. They had Left a gap just wide enough for him to squeeze back through.

"No luck with the garlic," Sandpaw panted as he slipped in. "Darkstripe's prowling around out there."

"Never mind," mewed Silverpaw. "We can get some tomorrow."

"I'll go and get you some poppy from Spottedleaf," Sandpaw offered. He was worried by the dull look in his friend's eyes, and the way his muscles seemed stiff with pain.

"No, don't worry," mewed Silverpaw. "I'll be fine."

"It's no trouble," Sandpaw insisted, and before Silverpaw could argue, he bounded off toward Spottedleaf's den.

He was pacing his small clearing, his eyes clouded with unhappiness.

"Are you okay?" Sandpaw asked.

"The spirits of Starclan are restless. I think they are trying to tell me something," he replied, flicking his tail uneasily. "What can I do for you?"

"I think Silverpaw could do with some poppy seeds for his leg." Sandpaw explained. "His rat bites are still hurting him."

"The pain of losing Frostfur will make his injuries feel worse. But he'll mend in time; don't worry. In the meantime, you're right, poppy seeds will help." Spottedleaf went into his den and brought out a dried poppy head. He placed it carefully on the ground. "Just shake out one or two and give them to him." he meowed.

"Thanks," Sandpaw mewed. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Go and see to your friend," answered Spottedleaf, avoiding his gaze.

Sandpaw picked up the poppy head between his teeth and began to walk away.

"Wait," Spottedleaf hissed suddenly.

Sandpaw spun around expectantly and met his tawny gaze. His eyes burned back at him.

"Sandpaw," he hissed. "Starclan spoke to me moons ago, before you joined the Clan. I sense they want me to tell you this now. They said only a sand storm can save our Clan."

Sandpaw stared at Spottedleaf, mystified.

The strange passion faded from his eyes. "Take care, Sandpaw," he meowed in his normal voice, and turned away.

"See you," Sandpaw replied uncertainly. He padded back through the fern tunnel. His strange words were echoing in his mind, but he could not make sense of them. Why had he shared them with him? Surely a sand storm was very uncommon to all who lived in the forest. He shook his head in frustration, and bounded over to the apprentices' den.

"Silverpaw!" Sandpaw hissed into the ear of his sleeping friend. They'd been allowed to rest all morning, after working on repairs for most of the night. Goldenflower had ordered them to be ready to begin training at sunhigh. The strong yellow light filtering through to the den told Sandpaw it was already near that now.

He'd had a restless night. Dreams swirled through his mind each time he fell asleep, confusing and indistinct, but full of darkness and menace.

"Silverpaw!" Sandpaw hissed again. But his friend did not stir. He'd eaten two of the poppy seeds before he'd slept, and now he was in a deep slumber.

"Are you awake, Sandpaw?" Patchpaw mewed from her nest.

Sandpaw spat silently under his breath. He had wanted to talk to Silverpaw before Patchpaw awoke.

"Yes!" he replied.

Patchpaw sat up in her bed of moss and heather and began to wash with quick flicks of her tongue. "Are you going to wake him?" she asked, nodding toward Silverpaw.

A deep voice growled outside their den. "I hope so! Training is about to start."

Sandpaw and Patchpaw jumped.

"Silverpaw, wake up!" Sandpaw poked his friend with one paw. "Goldenflower is waiting!"

Silverpaw lifted his head. His eyes were still heavy with sleep.

"Are you ready yet?" called Goldenflower.

Sandpaw and Patchpaw crept out of the den, blinking as they emerged into the sunlight.

The deputy was sitting beside the tree stump. "Is the other one coming?" he asked.

"Yes," Sandpaw replied, feeling defensive on behalf of his friend. "He's only just woken up."

"Training will do him good," growled Goldenflower. "He's grieved for long enough."

Sandpaw held the menacing yellow gaze for a few moments. Warrior and apprentice, for a heartbeat their eyes were locked as enemies.

Silverpaw scrambled sleepily out of the den.

"Oakstar will be ready for you in a moment, Sandpaw," announced

Goldenflower. The words distracted Sandpaw from his anger. His first training session with Oakstar! Excitement surged through him. He had expected his wounded mentor to be resting still.

"Silverpaw," continued Goldenflower, "You can join my training session. Do you think you're up to it, Patchpaw?" He glowered at his apprentice. "After all, you got some pretty nasty nettle stings while the rest of us were fighting those rats."

Patchpaw looked at the ground. "I'm fine," she mewed.

Silverpaw and Patchpaw followed the deputy out of the camp entrance. Patchpaw's head hung low as she disappeared through the gorse tunnel.

Sandpaw sat and waited for Oakstar. She did not keep him long. The reddish-brown queen emerged from her den and padded across the clearing. Her fur was still matted in places where her wounds were fresh, but she betrayed no pain in her confident stride. "Come," she called to him.

Sandpaw noticed with surprise that she was alone. Darkstripe and Longtail were nowhere to be seen. A thought occurred to him and suddenly his excitement was tinged with anxiety—here was an opportunity to tell Oakstar what he had overheard last night.

He caught up with her as she headed for the gorse tunnel and fell in step behind her. "Will your guards be joining us?" he asked hesitantly.

Oakstar replied without looking back, "I've ordered Darkstripe and Longtail to help with the camp repairs. Securing Thunderclan's base is our first priority."

Sandpaw's heartbeat quickened. He would tell her about Patchpaw as soon as they left camp.

The two cats followed the trail to the training hollow. The path was strewn with freshly fallen golden leaves that rustled beneath their paws. Sandpaw's mind raced as he searched for suitable words. What should he tell his leader? That Goldenflower was plotting to

get rid of his apprentice? And what would he say when Oakstar asked him why? Could he bring himself to say out loud that he suspected Goldenflower had killed Redtail? Even though he had no evidence beyond Patchpaw's excited storytelling at the Gathering?

By the time they reached the sandy hollow, Sandpaw had still not spoken. The hollow was empty.

"I asked Goldenflower to hold his training session in another part of the forest today," Oakstar explained as she padded into the center of the hollow. "I want to concentrate on your fighting skills, and I want *you* to concentrate on them too—which means no distractions."

I must tell her now, thought Sandpaw. *She needs to know about the danger Patchpaw is in.* His paws prickled with anxiety. *I won't have another chance like this...*

Sudden movement flashed in the corner of his eye. A swish of reddish-brown whirled past his nose, and Sandpaw fell forward as his forepaws were knocked lightly from underneath him. He staggered, regained his balance, and spun around to see Oakstar sitting calmly beside him. "Do I have your attention now?" she growled.

"Yes, Oakstar. Sorry!" he replied hastily, looking into her amber eyes.

"That's better. Sandpaw, you have been with us for many moons now. I have watched you fight. With the rats you were quick; with the Shadowclan warriors you were fierce. You outwitted Silverpaw on that very first day we met, and you defeated Raggedpelt with your cleverness too." She paused, then lowered her voice to an intense hiss. "But one day you will meet an opponent who is all of these things as well—quick and fierce and clever. It's my duty to prepare you for that day."

Sandpaw nodded, completely caught up in her words. His senses were fully alert. All thoughts of Patchpaw and Goldenflower had disappeared, and the musty odors and tiny noises of the forest rushed in upon him.

"Let's see how you fight," Oakstar ordered. "Attack me."

Sandpaw looked at her, sizing her up and wondering the best way to begin. Oakstar was standing less than three rabbit-lengths away. She was twice his size, so it would be a waste of effort to begin with the usual paw swipes and wrestling. But if he could leap straight onto her back with a powerful enough jump, he might be able to unbalance her. She hadn't taken her piercing amber eyes off him for an instant. Sandpaw stared back and leaped.

He had aimed to land squarely on her shoulders, but Oakstar was ready for him. She dropped swiftly into a crouch. As Sandpaw hit her, she rolled onto her back. Instead of landing on her shoulders he found himself crashing down toward her upturned belly. She caught him with all four paws and flung him easily away from her. Sandpaw felt he had been bundled away like a bothersome kit. He hit the dusty ground hard and lay winded for a moment before he scrambled to his feet.

"Interesting strategy, but your eyes betrayed where you were aiming," growled Oakstar as she stood up and shook off the dust from her thick coat. "Now, try again."

This time Sandpaw looked at her shoulders but aimed for her paws. When Oakstar dropped to the ground he would hit her as she couched. Sandpaw felt a rush of satisfaction as he leaped, but it turned to confusion as Oakstar unexpectedly sprang into the air and let him crash into the ground where she had stood just a heartbeat before. She timed it perfectly—as he landed, she thundered down on top of him, squashing the breath out of him.

"Now try something I don't expect," she hissed into his ear, climbing off him and backing away with a challenging gleam in her eyes.

Sandpaw scrambled up, panting, and shook himself crossly. Even Raggedpelt had not been so tricky. He hissed and leaped again. This time, as he flew at Oakstar, he stretched out his forepaws. She reared up on her hind legs and used her forepaws to twist him away. As he felt himself slipping, Sandpaw scrabbled with his hind paws in the sand, but it was too late and he flopped heavily onto his side.

"Sandpaw," Oakstar meowed calmly, as once more he struggled to his paws, "you're strong and quick, but you must learn to keep control of your speed and body weight so that it's not so easy for me to unbalance you. Try again."

Sandpaw backed away, hot, dusty, and out of breath. Frustration raged through him. He was determined to get the better of his mentor this time. Slowly he crouched and began to creep toward Oakstar. She mirrored his crouch and hissed into his face as he approached. He raised a paw and swiped at her left ear. She ducked to avoid his strike and reared up, towering over him. Quickly Sandpaw rolled onto his back, dithered beneath her body, and in one fast movement kicked both his back legs upward into he belly. Oakstar was flung backward and fell onto the sandy earth with a loud grunt.

Sandpaw flipped himself over and leaped to his paws. He felt jubilant. Then he saw Oakstar lying in the dirt, and for the first time remembered her wounds. Had he reopened them? He dashed to her side and stared down at her. To his relief her eyes glinted proudly back at him.

"That was much better," she puffed. She stood and shook herself. "Now it's my turn."

She sprang at him, knocking him to the ground, then retreated and let him pick himself up before leaping again. Sandpaw braced himself, but she bowled him over easily again.

"Look at my size, Sandpaw! Don't try to stand up against my attack. Use your wits. If you are fast enough to avoid me, then avoid me!"

Sandpaw scrabbled to his feet again, preparing for her attack. This time he didn't dig his paws into the soft ground, but stood lightly, keeping his weight on his toes. As Oakstar flew toward him, he hopped neatly out of her path, reared up onto his hind legs, and, with his forepaws, pushed her flying body onward past him.

Oakstar landed gracefully on all four paws and turned. "Excellent! You learn quickly," she purred. "But that was an easy move. Let's see how you deal with this one."

They trained until sunset. Sandpaw heaved a sigh of relief when he heard Oakstar meow, "That's enough for today." She seemed a little tired and stiff but she still leaped easily out of the sandy hollow.

Sandpaw scrambled after her. His muscles were aching and his head spinning with all he had learned. As they trekked together back through the trees, he couldn't wait to tell Silverpaw and Patchpaw about this training session. And it wasn't until they reached the camp boundary that Sandpaw realized he'd forgotten to tell Oakstar about Patchpaw.

Chapter 20

By the time Sandpaw returned, the camp was starting to look a little better. Parties of cats had clearly been patching and repairing continuously throughout the day. Lionheart and Tigerclaw were still busy fortifying the nursery walls, but the outer wall looked solid and secure once more.

Sandpaw trotted across the clearing to see if there was any fresh-kill around. He passed Firepaw and Fernpaw, who were preparing to leave in the next patrol.

"Sorry," mewed Firepaw, as Sandpaw sniffed hopefully around the eating area. "We ate the last two mice."

Sandpaw shrugged. He would catch something for himself later. He headed back to the apprentices' den, where Silverpaw was sitting with his back resting against the tree stump, licking a forepaw.

"Where's Patchpaw?" Sandpaw asked as he sat down.

"Not back from her task yet," replied Silverpaw. "Look at that!" He held out his paw for Sandpaw to inspect. The pad was torn and bleeding. "Goldenflower sent me fishing and I stepped on a sharp stone in the stream."

"That looks pretty deep. You should get Spottedleaf to take a look at it." Sandpaw advised. "Where did Goldenflower send Patchpaw, by the way?"

"Dunno. I was up to my belly in cold water." muttered Silverpaw. He stood up and limped away toward Spottedleaf's den.

Sandpaw settled down, his eyes fixed on the entrance to the camp, and waited for Patchpaw. After overhearing the warriors' conversation last night, he couldn't shake the feeling that something dreadful was going to happen to his friend. His heart lurched as he

saw Goldenflower enter the camp alone.

He waited longer. The moon was high in the sky. Surely Patchpaw should be back by now? Sandpaw found himself wishing he'd spoken to Oakstar when he'd had the chance. He could see Darkstripe and longtail guarding her den now, and he certainly didn't want them to overhear his concerns.

Goldenflower had brought back fresh-kill, which he was sharing with Brindleface outside the warriors' den. Sandpaw realized he was very hungry. Perhaps he should go and hunt—he might come across Patchpaw outside the camp. As he wondered what to do, Sandpaw saw Patchpaw trotting through the entrance of the camp. A thrill of relief raced through him, and not just because Patchpaw was holding fresh-kill between his teeth.

The apprentice came straight over to Sandpaw and dropped the mouthful of food on the ground. "Enough for all three of us!" she mewed proudly. "And it should taste extra good—it's from Shadowclan territory."

Sandpaw gasped. "You hunted in Shadowclan territory?"

"That was my task," Patchpaw explained.

"Goldenflower sent you into enemy territory to hunt!" Sandpaw could hardly believe it. "We must tell Oakstar. That was too dangerous!"

At the mention of Oakstar's name, Patchpaw shook her head. Her eyes looked hunted and shadowed with fear. "Look, just keep quiet, okay?" she hissed. "I survived. I even caught some prey. That's all there is to it."

"You survived *this time*!" Sandpaw spat.

"Shhh! Goldenflower's looking. Just eat your share and keep quiet!" snapped Patchpaw. Sandpaw shrugged and took a piece of the fresh-kill. Patchpaw ate quickly, avoiding Sandpaw's eye. "Shall we save some for Silverpaw?" she asked after a while.

"He went to see Spottedleaf." Sandpaw mumbled through a

mouthful. "He cut his paw. I don't know when he'll be back."

"Well, save him whatever you want," replied Patchpaw, suddenly sounding worn out. "I'm tired; I need to sleep." She stood up and pushed her way into the den.

Sandpaw stayed outside, watching the rest of the camp prepare for the night. He was going to have to tell Patchpaw what he'd overheard in the forest last night. She needed to know just how much danger she was in.

Goldenflower was lying beside Brindleface, sharing tongues, but with one eye fixed on the apprentices' den. Sandpaw yawned to show Goldenflower how exhausted he was. Then he got to his paws and followed Patchpaw inside.

Patchpaw was asleep, but Sandpaw could tell from her twitching paws and whiskers that she was dreaming. He knew it wasn't a good dream by the tiny mewls and squeaks that Patchpaw was making. Suddenly the black and white cat leaped to her paws, her eyes stretched wide in terror. Her fur was standing on end, and her back was arched.

"Patchpaw!" Sandpaw meowed in alarm. "Calm down. You're in our den. There's only me here!"

Patchpaw looked around wildly.

"It's just me," Sandpaw repeated.

Patchpaw blinked and seemed to recognize her friend. She collapsed onto her bed.

"Patchpaw," mewed Sandpaw seriously. "There's something you need to know. Something I heard last night when I was out looking for the wild garlic." Patchpaw looked away, still trembling from her dream, but Sandpaw persisted. "Patchpaw I heard Goldenflower telling Darkstripe and Longtail that you betrayed Thunderclan. He told them you slipped away during the trip to Mothermouth and told Shadowclan that the camp was unguarded."

Patchpaw spun around to face Sandpaw. "But I didn't" she

exclaimed, horrified.

"Of course you didn't," Sandpaw agreed. "But Darkstripe and Longtail believe you did, and Goldenflower persuaded them that they should get rid of you."

Patchpaw was speechless, her breath coming in gasps.

"Why would Goldenflower want to get rid of you, Patchpaw?" Sandpaw asked gently. "He's one of the Clan's strongest warriors. What threat are you to him?" Sandpaw suspected he already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear the truth from Patchpaw's own mouth. He waited while Patchpaw fumbled for words.

At last the black and white apprentice crawled closer to Sandpaw and whispered hoarsely into his ear. "Because the Riverclan deputy didn't kill Redtail; Goldenflower did."

Sandpaw nodded silently, and Patchpaw continued, her whisper cracking with tension. "Redtail killed the Riverclan deputy—"

"So Goldenflower didn't kill Bluefur." Sandpaw couldn't help interrupting.

Patchpaw shook her head. "No, he didn't! After Redtail had killed Bluefur, Goldenflower ordered me back to the camp. I wanted to stay, but he yowled at me to go, so I ran into the trees. I should have carried on running, but I couldn't leave while they were still fighting. I turned and crept back to see if Goldenflower needed help. By the time I got near, all the Riverclan warriors had fled, leaving just Redtail and Goldenflower. Redtail was watching the last warrior running away and Goldenflower"—Patchpaw paused, then gulped—"Goldenflower j-jumped on her. He sank his teeth into the back of her neck and Redtail fell to the ground, dead. That's when I ran. I don't know if Goldenflower saw me or not. I just kept running till I got back to the camp."

"Why didn't you tell Oakstar?" Sandpaw pressed gently.

"Would she have believed me?" Patchpaw's eyes rolled wildly. "Do *you* believe me?"

"Of course I do," Sandpaw mewed. He licked Patchpaw between the ears in an effort to calm and comfort his friend. He was going to have to find another opportunity to tell Oakstar about Goldenflower's treachery. "Don't worry, I'll sort it out," he promised. "Meanwhile, make sure you stick close to me or Silverpaw."

"Does Silverpaw know? About them wanting to get rid of me?"

"Not yet. But I'll have to tell him."

Patchpaw settled silently onto her belly and stared ahead.

"It's okay, Patchpaw," Sandpaw purred, touching the skinny black and white body with his nose. "I'll help you get out of this."

Silverpaw padded into the den at dawn. Firepaw and Fernpaw had returned from their patrol a while ago and were asleep in their nests.

"Hi!" mewed Silverpaw, sounding more cheerful than he had for days.

Sandpaw woke at once. "You sound better," he purred.

Silverpaw licked Sandpaw's ear. "Spottedleaf put some gunk on my cut and made me lie still for hours. I must've fallen asleep. By the way, I hope that chaffinch out there was for me, I was starving!"

"It was. Patchpaw caught it yesterday. Goldenflower sent her into —"

"Shut up, you two," growled Firepaw. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

Silverpaw rolled his eyes. "Come on, Sandpaw," he mewed. "Whitestorm has had her kits; let's go and visit them."

Sandpaw purred with pleasure. At last, something for Thunderclan to celebrate. He looked down at Patchpaw, who was still sleeping, and padded out of the den. With Silverpaw, he trotted across the clearing toward the nursery. The rising sun made his pelt glow with warmth, and he stretched appreciatively, reveling in the suppleness

of his spine and the strength in his legs.

"Stop showing off!" Silverpaw called over his shoulder. Sandpaw stopped stretching and bounded after his friend.

Brindleface was sitting outside the nursery, guarding the entrance. "Have you two come to see the new kits?" he meowed as Sandpaw and Silverpaw approached.

Sandpaw nodded.

"One at a time only, and you'll have to wait; Oakstar's with her now," Brindleface told them.

"Well, you can go first," Sandpaw offered. "I'll go and see Raggedpelt while I'm waiting." He dipped his head respectfully to Brindleface and headed off toward Raggedpelt's nest.

The old cat was washing behind her ears, her eyes half-closed with concentration.

"Don't tell me you're expecting rain!" Sandpaw teased.

Raggedpelt looked up. "You've been listening to too many elders' tales," she meowed. "What would be the point of a cat washing its ears if they're only going to get rained on anyway?"

Sandpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement. "Are you going to see Whitestorm's new litter?" he asked.

Raggedpelt stiffened and she shook her head. "I don't think I'd be very welcome," she growled.

"But they know you saved—" Sandpaw began.

"A she-cat is very protective of her newborns. Especially when it's her first litter. I think I'll stay away." Raggedpelt replied in a tone that invited no argument.

"As you wish. But I'm going to see them. It must be a good sign, having new kits in the camp."

Raggedpelt shrugged. "Sometimes," she muttered darkly.

Sandpaw turned and trotted back to the nursery. Clouds had covered the sun, making the air turn fresher. A fierce breeze tugged at his fur and rustled the leaves around the clearing.

Oakstar was sitting outside the nursery. Behind her, Silverpaw's tail was just disappearing into the narrow entrance. "Sandpaw," she greeted him. "Have you come to see Thunderclan's newest warriors?" The Thunderclan leader sounded tired and sad.

Sandpaw was surprised. Surely the kits were good news for Thunderclan?

"Yes, I have," he replied.

"Well, when you've finished, come and see me in my den."

"Yes, Oakstar," Sandpaw mewed as she walked slowly away. He felt his fur prickle. Here was another chance to speak to Oakstar alone. Perhaps Starclan was on his side, after all.

Silverpaw crawled out of the nursery entrance. "They're really cute," he mewed. "But I'm starving now. I'm off to find some fresh-kill. I'll save some for you if I find any!" He blinked affectionately at Sandpaw and bounded away.

Sandpaw purred a good-bye and looked up at Brindleface, who nodded his permission for him to enter the nursery. Sandpaw squeezed through the tiny entrance.

Four tiny she-kits huddled warmly in Whitestorm's deeply lined nest. Two kits were pale gray with darker flecks, one a dark brown tabby and one a dark gray kit. They mewled and squirmed beside Whitestorm's belly, their eyes shut tight.

"How are you feeling?" Sandpaw whispered to her.

"A little tired," answered Whitestorm. She looked down proudly at her litter. "But the kits are all strong and healthy."

"Thunderclan is lucky to have them," Sandpaw purred. "I was just

talking about them to Raggedpelt."

Whitestorm didn't answer, and Sandpaw couldn't miss the look of worry that flashed in her eyes as she nudged a straying kit closer to her.

Sandpaw felt a tremor of anxiety in his belly. Oakstar may have accepted Raggedpelt into Thunderclan, but it looked like the old cat was still not trusted by all of the Clan. He touched his nose affectionately to Whitestorm's flank, then turned and made his way out into the clearing.

The Clan leader was waiting for Sandpaw at the entrance to her den. Longtail sat at her side. The pale tabby warrior stared hard at Sandpaw as he approached. Sandpaw ignored her gaze and looked expectantly at Oakstar.

"Come inside," she meowed, turning to lead the way. Sandpaw trotted after her. Longtail immediately stood up as if to follow them.

Oakstar looked back at her over her shoulder. "I think I'll be safe enough with young Sandpaw," she meowed. Longtail looked uncertain for a moment, then sat down again outside the entrance.

Sandpaw had never been inside Oakstar's den. He padded after her through the lichen that draped its entrance. "Whitestorm's kits are lovely," he purred.

Oakstar looked serious. "Lovely they may be, but they mean more mouths to feed, and the season of leaf-bare will soon be here." Then she glanced at Sandpaw, who was unable to hide his surprise at her melancholy tone. "Oh, don't listen to me," meowed Oakstar, shaking her head impatiently. "The first cold wind always worries me. Come; make yourself comfortable." She tipped her head toward the dry, sandy floor.

Sandpaw dropped onto his belly and stretched his paws out in front of him.

Oakstar circled slowly onto her mossy nest. "I'm still aching from

our training session yesterday," she admitted when she had finally settled herself and curled her tail around her paws. "You fought well, young one."

For once, Sandpaw didn't stop to bask in her praise. His heart was thumping. This was the perfect moment to tell his leader his fears about Goldenflower. He lifted his chin, ready to speak.

But it was Oakstar who spoke first, staring past him at the far wall of her den. "I can still smell the stale stench of Shadowclan in the camp." she murmured. "I hoped never to see the day when our enemy broke into the heart of Thunderclan." Sandpaw nodded in silent agreement, sensing Oakstar was going to say more.

"And so many deaths." She sighed. "First Redtail, then Frostfur. I thank Starclan at least the warriors we have left are strong and loyal like them. At least with Goldenflower as deputy, Thunderclan may still be able to defend itself." Sandpaw's heart plummeted and an icy chill cut deep into him as Oakstar went on. "There was a time, when Goldenflower was a young warrior, that I feared for the strength of his passion. Such energy can need careful channeling. But now I am proud to see how much respect the Clan has for him. I know he is ambitious, but his ambition makes him one of the bravest cats I have ever had the honor to fight alongside."

Sandpaw knew at once that he could not tell Oakstar his suspicions about Goldenflower. Not when Oakstar looked to her deputy to protect the whole Clan. He would have to save Patchpaw himself. He took a deep breath and blinked slowly, so that when Oakstar turned and looked directly into his eyes, no trace of his shock and disappointment remained.

Her next words were quiet and full of concern. "You know Brokenstar will return. She made it clear at the Gathering that she wants hunting rights in all the territories."

"We fought her off once. We can do it again." Sandpaw insisted.

"That's true," Oakstar acknowledged with a wry nod. "Starclan will honor your courage, young Sandpaw." She paused and licked a healing wound on her side. "I think you ought to know that, in the

battle with the rats, it was not my fifth life that I lost, but my seventh."

Sandpaw sat bolt upright, shocked.

Oakstar went on. "I have let the Clan believe it was my fifth because I don't want them to fear for my safety. But two more lives, and I will have to leave you to join Starclan."

Sandpaw's mind was racing. Why was she telling him this? "Thank you for sharing this with me, Oakstar," he purred respectfully.

Oakstar nodded. "I am tired now," she rasped. "Off you go. And Sandpaw, I don't expect you to repeat this conversation to anyone."

"Of course, Oakstar," Sandpaw replied as he nosed his way out through the curtain of lichen.

Longtail was still sitting by the entrance. Sandpaw stepped past her and made his way toward his den. He didn't know which part of his conversation with Oakstar had been more bewildering.

He was stopped in his tracks by a yowl of horror coming from the nursery. Lionheart came sprinting into the clearing, her tail bristling and her eyes wide with alarm. "My kits! Someone has taken my kits!"

Goldenflower bounded over to her. He called to the Clan, "Quick, search the camp! Brindleface, stay where you are. Warriors, patrol the camp boundary. Apprentices, search every den!"

Sandpaw rushed to the nearest den, the warriors', and pushed his way inside. It was empty. He scrabbled through the bedding with his paws but there was neither sight nor scent of Lionheart's kits.

He charged outside and headed for his own den. Patchpaw and Silverpaw were already inside, pushing aside their nests, sniffing every corner. Fernpaw and Firepaw were searching the elders' den. Sandpaw left them to it and charged from one clump of grass to another, pushing his muzzle into them, ignoring the nettles that stung his nose. There was no sign of the kits anywhere. He looked around the camp boundary. Warriors paced backward and forward,

urgently sniffing the air.

Suddenly, Sandpaw spotted Raggedpelt in the distance. She was pushing her way through an unguarded part of the fern wall. She must have found a scent, he thought, and raced toward her as her tail disappeared into the greenery. By the time he arrived at the fern wall, she had gone. He sniffed the air. No kit-scent, just the bitter smell of Raggedpelt's fear. What was she afraid of? Sandpaw wondered.

Goldenflower's yowl sounded from the bushes behind the nursery. All the cats raced over to him, headed by Lionheart. They crowded as closely as they could, jostling to see through the dense undergrowth. Sandpaw nosed his way forward and saw Goldenflower standing over a motionless bundle of dappled fur.

Spottedleaf!

Sandpaw stared in disbelief at his lifeless body. Fury rose in him like a dark cloud, and he felt the blood roaring in his ears. Who had done this?

Oakstar stepped through the crowd and leaned over the medicine cat. "He has been killed by a warrior blow," she meowed softly.

Sandpaw craned his neck and saw a single wound on the back of Spottedleaf's neck. His head swam and suddenly he was unable to see clearly.

Through his grief, Sandpaw heard a murmur at the back of the crowd that swelled into a single piercing yowl.

"Raggedpelt is gone!"

Chapter 21

"Raggedpelt has killed Spottedleaf and taken my kits!" screeched Lionheart. The other queens rushed to Lionheart's side and tried to calm her with licks and caresses, but Lionheart pushed them away and wailed her grief to the darkening sky. As if in reply, the sky rumbled ominously and a cold wind ruffled the cats' fur.

"Raggedpelt!" hissed Goldenflower. "I always knew she was a traitor. Now we know how she managed to fight off the Shadowclan deputy. It was a setup to let her trick her way into our Clan!"

Lightning crackled overhead, punctuating Goldenflower's words with a glaring white flash, and a clap of thunder rolled around the woods.

Sandpaw couldn't believe what he was hearing. Dazed with grief, his mind whirled. Could Raggedpelt really have killed Spottedleaf?

Above the shocked murmurings, Darkstripe meowed loudly, "Oakstar! What do you say?"

The cats fell silent as they turned to look at their leader.

Oakstar's gaze moved across the crowd of cats, and settled finally on Spottedleaf's body. The first drops of rain began to fall, sparkling like dewdrops on the medicine cat's still-glossy fur.

Oakstar blinked slowly. Grief clouded her face, and for a moment Sandpaw was afraid that this new death would overwhelm her. But when her eyes opened they glittered with a fierceness that showed her determination to seek revenge for this cruel attack. She lifted her head. "If Raggedpelt has killed Spottedleaf and stolen Lionheart's kits, she will be hunted down without mercy." The crowd meowed approvingly. "But we must wait," Oakstar went on. "There is a storm coming, and I am not prepared to risk more lives. If Shadowclan has our kits, they will come to no immediate harm. I suspect Brokenstar wants them as recruits for her own Clan, or as

hostages—to force us to let her hunt in our territory. As soon as the storm has passed, a patrol will follow Raggedpelt and bring back our kits."

"We cannot waste time, or the scent will be lost in the rain!" Goldenflower protested.

Oakstar flicked her tail impatiently. "If we send out a hunting party now, our efforts will be wasted anyway. In this weather the scent will already be lost by the time we are ready. If we wait until after the storm, we stand a better chance of success."

There were murmurs of agreement among the Clan. Even though it was barely sunhigh, the sky was growing much darker. The cats were unsettled by the lightning and thunder, and seemed willing to listen to their leader's advice.

Oakstar looked at her deputy. "I'd like to discuss our plans with you, please, Goldenflower." Goldenflower nodded and stalked away toward Oakstar's den, but the leader hesitated. She glanced at Sandpaw, signaling with a flick of her tail and a ripple of her whiskers that she wanted to speak to him alone.

The other cats gathered around Spottedleaf and began to share tongues with him, their wails of grief sounding above the thunder. Oakstar wound her way through them and went toward the fern tunnel that led to Spottedleaf's den.

Sandpaw quietly skirted the mourning cats and followed her inside. It was very dark beneath the ferns. The storm had blotted out the morning sun so that it seemed as if night had fallen. Rain was falling more heavily now, spattering noisily against the leaves, but at least it was sheltered in Spottedleaf's clearing.

"Sandpaw," Oakstar meowed urgently as he arrived at her side, "where is Raggedpelt? Do you know?"

Sandpaw hardly heard her. He couldn't help remembering the last time he had come to this clearing. An image of Spottedleaf, trotting out of his den with his coat gleaming in the sunlight, burned in his mind, and he closed his eyes to preserve it.

"Sandpaw," snapped Oakstar, "you must save your grieving for later."

Sandpaw shook himself. "I... I saw Raggedpelt go through the camp boundary after the kits went missing. Do you really think she killed Spottedleaf and took the kits?"

Oakstar gazed steadily at him. "I don't know," she admitted. "I want you to find her and bring her back alive. I need to know the truth."

"You're not sending Goldenflower?" Sandpaw couldn't help asking.

"Goldenflower is a great warrior, but in this case his loyalty to the Clan may cloud his judgment," Oakstar explained. "He wants to give the Clan the vengeance it desires. No cat can blame him for that. The Clan believes Raggedpelt has betrayed us, and if Goldenflower thinks he can reassure the Clan by handing them the dead body of Raggedpelt, that's what he will do."

Sandpaw nodded. She was right—Goldenflower would kill Raggedpelt without question.

Oakstar looked stern for a moment. "If I find that Raggedpelt is a traitor, then I will kill her myself. But if she is not..." Her amber eyes burned into Sandpaw's. "I will not let an innocent cat die."

"But what if Raggedpelt won't come back?" Sandpaw meowed.

"She will, if *you* ask her."

Sandpaw felt stunned by Oakstar's faith in him. The enormity of what she was asking him to do weighed down on him, and he wondered if he had enough courage to carry it through.

"Go at once!" she ordered. "But be careful, you will be on your own and there may be enemy patrols about. This storm will keep our own warriors in camp for a while."

Thunder rolled overhead as Sandpaw dashed out into the clearing. Rain hammered down, pelting against his fur like tiny stones. A bolt of lightning lit up the faces of Darkstripe and Longtail as they watched him cross the clearing.

Sandpaw bounded past the nursery. He couldn't leave without sharing tongues with Spottedleaf. The other cats had run for shelter, abandoning the medicine cat's body to the downpour while they huddled beneath the dripping ferns, meowing their fear and loss.

Sandpaw buried his nose in Spottedleaf's wet fur and breathed in his scent one last time. "Good-bye, my sweet Spottedleaf," he murmured.

His ears pricked as he overheard the voices of Lionheart and Smallear talking nearby. He froze, straining to listen.

"Raggedpelt must have had help," Smallear growled.

"Someone from *Thunderclan*?" came the anxious voice of Lionheart.

"You've heard what Goldenflower's been saying about Patchpaw. Perhaps she had something to do with it. I've never felt comfortable with her, myself."

The fur on Sandpaw's spine prickled. If Goldenflower had been spreading his malicious rumors as far as the nursery, Patchpaw wouldn't be safe anywhere in the camp.

Sandpaw realized he had to act quickly. He would find Raggedpelt first, then deal with Patchpaw. He raced to the spot where he had last seen Raggedpelt. He knew her scent so well that he could even smell it through the rain-soaked leaves. He began to push through the bushes, mouth open, to detect where her trail led.

"Sandpaw!"

Sandpaw jumped and then relaxed as he realized it was Silverpaw's voice.

"I've been looking for you!" mewed his friend as he rushed toward him.

Sandpaw gingerly stepped back out of the ferns.

Silverpaw squinted as rain dripped down his long fur and into his eyes. "Where are you going?" he mewed.

"To look for Raggedpelt," Sandpaw replied.

"On your own?" Silverpaw's broad silver tabby face showed concern.

Sandpaw thought for a moment and decided to tell Silverpaw the truth. "Oakstar asked me to bring Raggedpelt back," he mewed.

"What?" Silverpaw looked shocked. "Why *you*?"

"Maybe she thinks I know Raggedpelt best, and that I'd find her more easily."

"Wouldn't a party of warriors stand more of a chance?" Silverpaw pointed out. "Goldenflower's the best tracker in the Clan, and if anyone could bring her back, *he* could."

"Maybe Goldenflower wouldn't bring her back," Sandpaw murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Goldenflower's out for revenge. He would just kill her."

"But if she killed Spottedleaf and took the kits..."

"Do you really believe that?" Sandpaw asked.

Silverpaw looked at his friend, shaking his head in confusion. "Do you think she's innocent?" he mewed.

"I don't know," Sandpaw admitted. "And neither does Oakstar. She wants to find out the truth. That's why she's sending me instead of Goldenflower."

"But if she *ordered* Goldenflower to bring her back alive..." Silverpaw's words were drowned by a deafening crack of thunder, and a flash of lightning lit up the trees around them.

In the dazzling light, Sandpaw glimpsed Lionheart chasing Patchpaw away from the nursery. The golden tabby queen's face was twisted with fury as she hissed at the young black and white cat and lunged forward to give her a warning nip on the hind leg.

Silverpaw turned to Sandpaw. "What's *that* all about?" he mewed.

Sandpaw stared back at his friend, his mind leaping ahead to a new idea. It looked like Patchpaw's time had run out, and Sandpaw needed Silverpaw's help. But would his friend believe him? The wind was beginning to roar through the trees above them, and Sandpaw had to raise his voice. "Patchpaw's in great danger," he meowed.

"What?"

"I have to get her away from Thunderclan. Right now, before anything happens to her."

Silverpaw looked puzzled. "Why? What about Raggedpelt?"

"There's no time to explain," Sandpaw mewed urgently. "You'll just have to trust me. There must be a way we can get Patchpaw away. Oakstar's going to keep the warriors in camp till the storm is over, but that doesn't leave us much time." He tried to picture the hidden corners of the woods, beyond Thunderclan territory. "We'll have to take her somewhere Goldenflower won't find her, somewhere she can survive without the Clan."

Silverpaw stared at him for a moment. "What about Raven?"

"Raven!" Sandpaw echoed. "You mean, take Patchpaw to the Twolegplace?" His ears twitched with excitement. "Yes, that might be the best idea."

"Come on, then!" meowed Silverpaw. "What are we waiting for?"

Relief washed over Sandpaw. He should have known his old friend would help. He shook the rain from his head, then touched Silverpaw's fur with his nose. "Thank you," he purred. "Now, let's get Patchpaw."

They found their friend huddled miserably inside their den. Firepaw and Fernpaw were in their nests, too, looking tense and scared as the storm crashed overhead.

"Patchpaw," Sandpaw hissed through the entrance.

Patchpaw looked up. Sandpaw flicked his ears and the black and white cat followed him out into the storm.

"Come on," Sandpaw whispered. "We're taking you to Raven."

"Raven?" Patchpaw mewed in bewilderment, narrowing her eyes against the driving rain. "Why?"

"Because you'll be safe there," Sandpaw answered, looking the black and white cat straight in the eye.

"Did you see what Lionheart did?" mewed Patchpaw, her voice quavering. "I was only going to check on the kits..."

"Come on," Sandpaw interrupted her. "We must hurry!"

Patchpaw met her friend's gaze. "Thanks, Sandpaw," she murmured. Then she turned into the wind and bounded across the clearing.

The three apprentices rushed toward the camp entrance, their fur flattened by the howling wind. As they entered the gorse tunnel, a voice called them back.

"You three! Where are you going?"

It was Goldenflower.

Sandpaw whirled around, feeling his heart sink. He wondered desperately what he could say, when he spotted Oakstar striding toward them. She frowned for a moment, then her face cleared.

"Well done, Sandpaw," she meowed. "I see you've persuaded your two friends to go with you. Thunderclan has brave apprentices, Goldenflower, if they are willing to run an errand in weather like this."

"Surely this is not a time for errands?" object Goldenflower.

"One of Whitestorm's kits has a cough." Oakstar's voice was icily calm. "Sandpaw has offered to fetch some coltsfoot for her."

"Does he really need his friends to go too?" asked Goldenflower.

"In this storm, I think he's lucky to have the company!" answered Oakstar. She looked deep into Sandpaw's eyes, and he was suddenly aware of the trust she was placing in him. "Off you go, you three," she meowed.

Sandpaw returned her gaze gratefully. "Thank you," he purred, dipping his head. With a swift glance at his companions, he led the way along the familiar paths toward Fourtrees. The wind roared through the branches above them and the trees swayed, their trunks creaking and cracking as though they might fall at any moment. The rain poured down through the leaves, soaking the cats to their hides.

They reached the stream, but the stepping stones they usually leaped across had completely disappeared. The cats stopped on the bank and looked down in dismay at the wide, brown, swirling river.

"This way," Sandpaw meowed. "There's a fallen tree up here. We can use it to cross." He led Silverpaw and Patchpaw upstream to a log that rested only a kittenstep above the rushing water. "Be careful, it'll be slippery!" Sandpaw warned, leaping carefully up onto it. The log's bark had been stripped away, leaving only smooth, wet wood to balance on. Carefully the three cats walked along the trunk. Sandpaw jumped down on the other side and watched his friends until they, too, had landed safely.

The trees were bigger on the other side, offering some shelter from the storm as they hurried on, side by side.

"Are you going to tell me exactly why we need to get Patchpaw away?" panted Silverpaw.

"Because she knows that Goldenflower killed Redtail," Sandpaw answered.

"Goldenflower killed Redtail!" Silverpaw echoed in disbelief, stopping dead and staring first at Sandpaw and then at Patchpaw.

"At the battle with Riverclan," puffed Patchpaw. "I saw him."

"But why would he do that?" Silverpaw protested, setting off again.

They started down the slope that led into the clearing at Fourtrees.

"I don't know. Maybe he thought Oakstar would make him deputy." Sandpaw suggested, raising his voice against the wind.

Silverpaw didn't reply, but his face darkened.

The cats began to climb the steep slope that led up to Windclan territory. As Sandpaw leaped upward from rock to rock, he called down to Silverpaw behind him. He wanted his friend to understand just how dangerous it was for Patchpaw in the Thunderclan camp. "I overheard Goldenflower talking to Darkstripe and Longtail on the night Frostfur was killed." he yowled. "He wants to get rid of Patchpaw."

"Get *rid* of her? You mean *kill* her?" Silverpaw sat heavily on a rock.

Sandpaw stopped too. He looked down at his friends. Patchpaw had halted farther down the slope, her sides heaving as she caught her breath. She looked smaller than ever with her sodden fur clinging to her scrawny body.

"You saw the way Lionheart went for Patchpaw today?" Sandpaw meowed to Silverpaw. "Goldenflower's been hinting to everyone that Patchpaw is a traitor. But she'll be safe with Raven. Now come on; we must hurry!"

It was impossible to talk in the open expanse of Windclan territory. The wind howled around them while the thunder and lightning rolled and flashed overhead. The three cats lowered their heads and pushed onward into the heart of the storm.

Eventually they reached the edge of the plateau that marked the end of Windclan's territory.

"We can't take you any farther, Patchpaw," meowed Sandpaw through the gale. "We have to get back and find Raggedpelt before the storm has passed."

Patchpaw looked up through the battering rain, alarmed. Then she nodded.

"Will you be able to find Raven alone?" yowled Sandpaw.

"Yes, I remember the way," answered Patchpaw.

"Watch out for those dogs," warned Silverpaw.

Patchpaw nodded. "I will!" Suddenly she frowned, "How can you be sure Raven will welcome me?"

"Just tell her you caught an adder once!" answered Silverpaw, affectionately nudging his friend's rain-soaked shoulder.

"Go," Sandpaw urged, aware that time was short. He licked Patchpaw's skinny chest. "And don't worry; I'll make sure everyone knows you didn't betray Thunderclan."

"What if Goldenflower comes looking for me?" Patchpaw's voice was small against the rumbling storm.

Sandpaw met her gaze steadily. "He won't. I will tell him you are dead."

Chapter 22

Sandpaw and Silverpaw retraced their steps to Thunderclan territory. Both cats were bone-weary and wet through, but Sandpaw kept up the pace. The storm was beginning to move away. A Thunderclan patrol would be out soon and on Raggedpelt's trail. They had to find her first.

The sky was still dark, even though the black thunderclouds were beginning to roll away toward the horizon. Sandpaw guessed that it must be nearly sunset.

"Why don't we head straight into Shadowclan territory?" suggested Silverpaw as they ran down the steep hillside into Fourtrees.

"We need to pick up Raggedpelt's scent first," Sandpaw explained. "I just hope it won't lead to the Shadowclan camp."

Silverpaw glanced sideways at his friend, but didn't reply.

They headed back over the stream, into Thunderclan territory. There was no scent of Raggedpelt until they crossed into the oak woods close to the camp.

Now that the rain had finally stopped, the scents around them were beginning to return. Sandpaw hoped that the rain had not washed away Raggedpelt's trail completely. He stopped and brushed at a fern with the tip of his nose, and recognized the familiar smell. Raggedpelt's fear-scent prickled in his nostrils. "She came this way!" he meowed.

He pushed his way through the wet undergrowth. Silverpaw followed. The rain was easing, and the thunder was fading into the distance. Time was running out. Sandpaw pushed on faster.

To his dismay, he realized Raggedpelt's scent was indeed leading them straight to Shadowclan territory. His heart sank. Did this mean Goldenflower's accusations were true? Sandpaw began to

hope that each new smell would take them in a different direction, but the trail was unfaltering.

They arrived at the Thunderpath and halted. Several monsters roared by, throwing up fountains of dirty water. The two cats hung back from the edge of the wide, gray track until there was a gap. Then they raced across the path and into Shadowclan territory.

The scent markers that lined the border made Sandpaw's paws tingle.

Silverpaw halted and looked around nervously. "I always thought I'd have a few more warriors with me when I finally entered Shadowclan territory," he confessed.

"Not afraid, are you?" Sandpaw murmured.

"Aren't *you*? My mother warned me about the stench of Shadowclan many times."

"My mother never taught me such things," Sandpaw replied. But for the first time he was relieved that his fur was so wet that it clung to his body—Silverpaw might not notice the way it was bristling fearfully along his spine.

The two cats prowled onward, alert to every sight and sound. Silverpaw was on the lookout for Shadowclan patrols, and Sandpaw for the Thunderclan party he knew must come soon.

Raggedpelt's scent trail led them steadily into the heart of Shadowclan's hunting grounds. The woods here were gloomy, the undergrowth crowded with nettles and brambles.

"I can't smell her," complained Silverpaw. "It's too wet."

"It's there," Sandpaw assured him.

"I can smell *that* though," Silverpaw spat suddenly.

"What?" Sandpaw hissed. He stopped, alarmed.

"Kitscent. There's kit blood here!"

Sandpaw sniffed again, seeking out the smell of Thunderclan offspring. "I smell it too," he agreed. "And something else!" He flicked his tail down sharply, warning Silverpaw to keep quiet. Then, silently, he signaled with his whiskers toward a blackened ash tree up ahead.

Silverpaw twitched his ears questioningly. Sandpaw gave him a tiny nod. Raggedpelt was sheltering behind the wide, split trunk.

Instinctively the two cats separated, each moving toward the tree, one on either side. They crept over the soft forest floor, using all the tricks of basic training, stepping lightly, keeping their bodies low.

Then they leaped.

Raggedpelt yowled with surprise as the two cats landed beside her and pinned her to the ground. She struggled free, spitting, and backed into a sheltered hollow at the base of the trunk. Sandpaw and Silverpaw moved forward, blocking her way out.

"I knew Thunderclan would blame me!" she hissed, her eyes flashing with all her old hostility.

"Where are the kits?" Sandpaw demanded.

"We can smell their blood!" spat Silverpaw. "Have you harmed them?"

"I don't have them," snarled Raggedpelt angrily. "I've come to find them and take them back. I stopped because I smelled blood too. But they're not here."

Sandpaw and Silverpaw looked at one another.

"I don't have them!" insisted Raggedpelt.

"Why did you run away, then? Why did you kill Spottedleaf?" Silverpaw asked the questions Sandpaw couldn't bring himself to say out loud.

"Spottedleaf is *dead*?" There was no mistaking the shock in Raggedpelt's voice.

Relief washed over Sandpaw. "You didn't know?" he croaked.

"How could I? I left camp as soon as I heard the kits were missing."

Silverpaw looked suspicious, but Sandpaw could hear the truth in her voice.

"I know who has taken the kits," she continued. "I smelled his scent near the nursery."

"Who was it?" Sandpaw asked.

"Rowanberry—one of Brokenstar's warriors. And as long as the kits are with Shadowclan, they're in great danger."

"But surely even Shadowclan wouldn't harm kits!" Sandpaw protested.

"Don't be so sure," spat Raggedpelt. "Brokenstar intends to use them as warriors."

"But they are only three moons old!" Silverpaw gasped.

"That hasn't stopped her before. She has been training kits as young as three moons since she became leader. At five moons she sends them out as warriors!"

"Surely they'd be too small to fight!" Sandpaw protested. But in his mind's eye he pictured the undersize Shadowclan apprentices he had seen at the Gathering. They weren't just small; they were kits!

Raggedpelt hissed scornfully, "Brokenstar doesn't care about that. She has plenty more kits to spare, and if they run out, she can steal them from other Clans!" Her voice was filled with rage. "After all, we're talking about a cat who killed kits from her own Clan!"

Sandpaw and Silverpaw were stunned.

"If she killed Shadowclan's kits, why wasn't she punished?" Sandpaw asked at last.

"Because she lied," growled Raggedpelt. Bitterness made her voice

hard. "She accused me of their murder, and Shadowclan believed her!"

Sandpaw suddenly understood. "Is that why you were driven out of Shadowclan?" he asked. "You have to come back with us and tell all this to Oakstar."

"Not before I have rescued your kits!" Raggedpelt spat.

Sandpaw lifted his head and sniffed the air. The rain had stopped, and the wind was dying down. The Thunderclan patrol would be well on its way. They were not safe here.

Silverpaw still seemed shocked by Raggedpelt's accusation. "How could a leader kill kits from her own Clan?" he demanded.

"Brokenstar insisted on training them too hard and too young. She took two of the kits away for battle practice." Raggedpelt took a deep, wheezing breath. "They were only four moons old. They were already dead when she brought them back to me. They bore the scratches and bites of a full warrior, not of apprentices. She must have fought them herself. There was nothing I could do. When their mother came to see them, Brokenstar was with me. She said that she had found me standing over their dead bodies." Her voice cracked and she looked away.

"Why didn't you tell her it was Brokenstar?" Sandpaw asked in disbelief.

Raggedpelt shook her head. "I couldn't."

"Why not?"

The old she-cat hesitated. When she spoke, her voice was heavy with regret. "Brokenstar is Shadowclan's leader. Noble Yellowstar was her father. Her words is law."

Sandpaw looked away and the three cats sat in silence for a moment. Then Sandpaw meowed, "We'll rescue the kits together. Tonight. But we can't stay here. I can smell the Thunderclan patrol coming." He paused. "If Goldenflower is with them, Raggedpelt doesn't stand a chance. He'll kill her before we can explain."

Raggedpelt looked at him, alert and determined again. "There's peat this way; it'll be wet after the rain," she told him. "Our scents will be disguised there."

She leaped into a clump of ferns and Sandpaw and Silverpaw quickly followed her. They could hear the rustling of undergrowth in the distance now. It was no longer the wind that disturbed the bushes, but an approaching patrol, no doubt hungry for revenge and fired up by Goldenflower's lies.

An eerie stillness settled over the woods, and a thin fog was beginning to gather between the tree trunks. Sandpaw shook the droplets off his coat and impatiently pulled a burr off his chest.

Raggedpelt led them onward. The ground grew soggier, and their paws began to sink into the soft peat. The musty smell choked Sandpaw's nostrils, but at least it would mask their own trail. Behind them, the noise of cats grew louder.

"Quick, under here," Raggedpelt urged, ducking under a broad-leaved bush. The three cats crouched beneath it, drawing in their tails. Sandpaw kept as still as he could, trying to ignore the rank wetness of the ground seeping into his belly fur, and listening to the rustling of the Thunderclan patrol as it came nearer and nearer.

Chapter 23

Sandpaw could tell there were several cats in the patrol, traveling fast. He couldn't recognize the individual scents of the cats through the earthy bog odors, but he knew it was Thunderclan. He held his breath as the pawsteps raced past and away.

"Are we really going to try to rescue the kits from Shadowclan alone?" whispered Silverpaw.

Raggedpelt answered him first. "I might be able to find us some help from inside Shadowclan. Not all the cats support Brokenstar."

Sandpaw pricked up his ears and Silverpaw flicked his tail in surprise.

"When she became leader," Raggedpelt explained, "Brokenstar forced the elders to leave the security of the inner camp. They had to live on the boundary and hunt for themselves. These are cats who have grown up with the warrior code. Some of them might help us."

Sandpaw stared into her old eyes, thinking quickly. "And I might be able to persuade the Thunderclan hunting party to help us too," he meowed. "If I can speak to them before they see Raggedpelt, I might be able to make them believe her story. Silverpaw, you wait at the dead ash, where we smelled the kit blood, till one of us returns."

Silverpaw looked worried. "But do you really trust Raggedpelt to bring back help?" he murmured to Sandpaw.

"You *must* trust me," growled Raggedpelt. "I will return."

Silverpaw looked at Sandpaw, who nodded.

Without another word Raggedpelt sprang past the two apprentices

and disappeared into the bushes.

"Have we done the right thing?" asked Silverpaw.

"I don't know," Sandpaw admitted. "If we have, we are heroes and the kits are safe. If we are wrong, then we are as good as dead."

Sandpaw sprinted after the patrol, around brambles, past gorse, and through nettles. The trail was easy to follow. The angry Thunderclan cats weren't trying to disguise their presence in Shadowclan's territory.

Overhead, the thick layer of cloud had finally rolled away. Beyond the treetops, Silverpelt glittered across the night sky. The moon was just rising, but it's cold light couldn't pierce the mist that clung to the shadowy undergrowth.

Sandpaw concentrated on the scent from up ahead. He could smell Brindleface. He sniffed again. Goldenflower wasn't with them. He raced to catch up and skidded to a halt behind the band of Thunderclan cats.

The warriors turned and glared at him, fur bristling, ears flattened aggressively. Darkstripe was with them and the young tom Mousefur, as well as the tortoiseshell and white warrior Dappletail. Willowpelt was with them too.

"Sandpaw!" growled Brindleface. "What are you doing here?"

Sandpaw gasped for breath. "Oakstar sent me!" he panted. "She wanted me to find Raggedpelt before—"

Brindleface interrupted him. "Ah!" he meowed. "Oakstar told me I might find a friend out here. Now I understand what she meant." He looked thoughtfully at Sandpaw.

"Is Goldenflower nearby?" Sandpaw asked, feeling a tingle of pride at their shared gaze.

Brindleface looked at him curiously. "Oakstar insisted she needed him to remain at camp, to protect the remaining kits."

Sandpaw nodded quickly, relieved. He meowed urgently, "Brindleface, I need your help. I can lead you to the kits. Silverpaw is waiting for me. We plan to rescue them tonight. Will you come?"

"Of course we'll come!" The warriors flicked their tails with excitement.

"It will mean raiding the Shadowclan camp." Sandpaw warned.

"Can you lead us there?" asked Dappletail eagerly.

"No, but Raggedpelt can. And she has promised to bring help from her old allies in the camp."

Mousefur glared at him and thrashed his tail angrily. "You have found Raggedpelt?" he hissed.

"I don't understand," meowed Brindleface, puzzled. "The traitor is going to help rescue the kits she stole?"

Sandpaw took a deep breath to calm himself, then looked steadily into Brindleface's eyes. "Raggedpelt didn't take them," he meowed. "Nor did she murder Spottedleaf. She wants to help us rescue our kits."

Brindleface stared back at him, then blinked slowly. "Lead the way, Sandpaw," he ordered.

Silverpaw was waiting by the ash tree, pacing restlessly around its rotten trunk. He stopped as soon as he saw the patrol emerge from the mist and twitched his whiskers in greeting.

"Any sign of Raggedpelt?" Sandpaw asked.

"Not yet," answered Silverpaw.

"We don't know how far it is to the Shadowclan camp," Sandpaw pointed out quickly, feeling Brindleface stiffen beside him. "She may be on her way back right now."

"Or she might be happily sharing tongues with her Shadowclan comrades while we sit here like fools waiting to be ambushed!"

meowed Silverpaw.

Brindleface watched the two apprentices. His ears flicked uneasily. "Sandpaw?" he prompted.

"She will come back," Sandpaw promised.

"Well said, young Sandpaw." Raggedpelt stalked out from behind the ash tree and sat down. "You're not the only one who can sneak up on someone," she meowed at Sandpaw. "Remember the day we met? You were looking in the wrong direction that time too."

Three other Shadowclan cats appeared from behind the tree and settled themselves calmly on either side of Raggedpelt. The Thunderclan cats bristled, alert and suspicious.

Both Clans stared silently at each other. Sandpaw fidgeted uncomfortably, unsure what to do now. Eventually one of the Shadowclan cats, a gray she-cat, spoke. Her long body was skinny, and her fur looked dull. "We have come to help you, not to harm you. You have come for your kits, we will help you rescue them."

"What's in it for you?" asked Brindleface warily.

"We want your help to get rid of Brokenstar. She has broken the warrior code, and Shadowclan is suffering."

"So it's that simple, is it?" growled Dappletail. "We just drop into your camp, snatch the kits, kill your leader, and go home."

"You will not meet as much resistance as you think," murmured the gray she-cat.

Raggedpelt stood up. "Let me introduce my old friends," she meowed, weaving her way around the Shadowclan cats. She brushed past the gray she-cat. "This is Ashfur; she is one of the Clan elders."

"And this is Nightpelt, a senior warrior before Yellowstar was killed." She circled a battered black she-cat, who nodded at them.

"And this is one of our elder queens, Finchflight. Two of her kits

died driving out Windclan."

Finchflight, a small black and white she-cat, meowed in greeting. "I do not wish to lose any more of my kits," she told them.

Brindleface have his chest a quick lick to smooth down his fur. "You are clearly skilled warriors if you managed to creep up on us like that. But are there enough of you? We need to know what we'll face when we raid the Shadowclan camp."

"The old and sick of Shadowclan are slowly starving," meowed Ashfur. "The casualties among our kits are more than we can cope with."

"But if Shadowclan is a mess," burst out Darkstripe, "how come you have shown so much strength lately? And why is Brokenstar still your leader?"

"Brokenstar is surrounded by a small group of elite warriors," answered Ashfur. "They are the ones to fear, because they would die for her without question. The other warriors obey her orders only because they are frightened. They will fight by her side as long as they think Brokenstar is going to win. If they thought she would lose..."

"They would fight against her, not *for* her!" Darkstripe finished the elder's words in disgust. "What sort of loyalty is that?"

The hackles of the Shadowclan cats began to rise.

"Our Clan was not always like this," Raggedpelt interrupted. "When Yellowstar led Shadowclan, we were feared for our strength. But int hose days our strength came from the warrior code and Clan loyalty, not from fear and bloodlust." The old medicine cat sighed. "If only Yellowstar had lived longer."

"How did Yellowstar die?" asked Brindleface curiously. "There were so many rumors at the Gatherings, but no one seemed to know for sure."

Raggedpelt's eyes clouded with sorrow. "He was ambushed by a warrior patrol from another Clan."

Brindleface nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that is what most cats seemed to think. These aare bad times indeed, when leaders are picked off in the dark, instead of open and honorable battle."

Sandpaw frowned, his mind racing over different battle plans. "Is there any way of taking the kits without alerting the whole Clan?" he asked.

Finchflight answered him. "They are very closely guarded. Brokenstar will be expecting Thunderclan to try to take them. You won't be able to steal them in secret. Open attack is your only hope."

"Then we must concentrate our attack on Brokenstar and her inner guard," meowed Brindleface.

Raggedpelt had a suggestion. "The Shadowclan warriors should lead me into the Shadowclan camp. They could say they had captured me. We have to make sure Brokenstar and her warriors are out of their dens. News of my capture will bring them into the clearing. Once they're all out in the open, I'll give the signal for you to attack."

Brindleface was silent for a moment. Then he nodded, his face grave as he committed his warriors to the attack. "Very well, Raggedpelt," he meowed. "Please lead the way to the Shadowclan camp."

Chapter 24

Raggedpelt turned and pushed her way into the bracken. Brindleface and the others followed her.

Sandpaw was tingling with excitement. He didn't feel the damp chill in the air, and his weariness was long forgotten.

Raggedpelt guided them to a small hollow surrounded by thick undergrowth and pointed out the entrance to the Shadowclan camp. The tangled mass of brambles looked very different from the near gorse tunnel that led into the Thunderclan camp. The camp boundary was full of holes and gaps and the stench of rotting meat wafted toward them.

"You eat *crow-food*?" whispered Silverpaw, curling his lip.

"Our warriors are used for attacking, not hunting," replied Ashfur. "We eat whatever we can find."

"Thunderclan, hide in that clump of bracken over there," hissed Raggedpelt. "It's full of toadstools that will disguise your scent. Wait here till you hear me call."

She stepped back to let the other Shadowclan cats lead the way, tucking herself into the center of their group as though she were their prisoner. They headed silently into the camp.

The Thunderclan cats settled themselves among the toadstools, tense and alert. Sandpaw could feel his coat prickling. He looked at Silverpaw beside him. The thick fur on the back of his friend's neck was standing on end, and Sandpaw could hear him panting with suppressed excitement.

Suddenly yowling erupted from the Shadowclan camp. Without hesitating, the Thunderclan cats sprang from their hiding places and raced through the entrance.

Raggedpelt, Ashfur, Finchflight, and Nightpelt were in a well-trodden, muddy clearing, wrestling with six vicious looking warriors. Sandpaw recognized Brokenstar and her deputy, Blackfoot, among them. The warriors looked hungry and battle-scarred, but Sandpaw could see the hard muscles pounding beneath their patchy fur.

Around the edge of the clearing, groups of scrawny cats stared uncertainly at the mayhem. Their skinny bodies seemed to recoil at the violence, while their dull eyes looked on, shocked and confused. Out of the corner of his eyes, Sandpaw saw Runningnose back away and hide beneath a bush.

At Brindleface's nodded signal, the Thunderclan cats leaped into the battle.

Sandpaw grasped a silver tabby with his claws, but was shaken loose. He tumbled over and the Shadowclan warrior turned on him and gripped him with claws as sharp as black thorns. Sandpaw managed to twist and sink his teeth deep into the cat's flesh. The warrior's yowl told him he had found a tender spot, and he bit harder. The warrior screeched again, ripping herself free, and ran off into the bushes.

Sandpaw stood up. A young Shadowclan apprentice leaped at him from the edge of the camp, its soft kitten fur fluffed up with fear.

Sandpaw sheathed his claws and batted him away easily. "This is not your battle," he hissed.

Brindleface already had Blackfoot pinned to the ground. He gave her a vicious bite and the injured deputy raced away toward the camp entrance and out into the safety of the forest.

"Sandpaw!" Sandpaw heard Finchflight screech his name. "Watch out! Rowanberry is—" He didn't hear the rest. A heavily built cream and brown cat crashed into him. *Rowanberry!* Sandpaw dug his claws into the ground and whirled around to fight. The warrior that had killed Spottedleaf! Rage surged through him and he flung himself onto the cream and brown tom.

Sandpaw pushed the warrior to the ground and pressed his head into the dirt. Blinded by fury, he prepared to sink his teeth into Rowanberry's neck. But before he could deal his death blow; Brindleface knocked him aside and grasped the Shadowclan warrior.

"Thunderclan warriors do not kill unless they have to," he growled in Sandpaw's ear. "We just need to let them know not to show their faces here again!" He gave Rowanberry a fierce bite that sent him screaming out of the camp.

Still raging, Sandpaw looked around wildly. Brokenstar's warriors had gone.

An angry screech sounded from behind Silverpaw. Silverpaw leaped out of the way and Sandpaw saw Raggedpelt gripping Brokenstar with muddy, bloodstained paws. Her body bled from several wounds. Her ears were flattened against her head, and her whiskers were drawn back as she crouched, flattened beneath Raggedpelt's powerful grasp.

"I never thought you would be harder to kill than my father!" she snarled up at her.

Raggedpelt recoiled as if she had been stung by a bee, her face twisted suddenly by shock and grief. She loosened her grip on Brokenstar, and instantly she threw her aside with a twist of her powerful body.

"*You* killed Yellowstar?" Raggedpelt wailed, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Brokenstar eyed her coldly. "You found his body. Didn't you recognize my fur between his claws?" Raggedpelt stared in horror as she continued. "He was a soft and foolish leader. He deserved to die."

"No!" hissed Raggedpelt, her head dropping. Then she gave herself a shake. She looked up at Brokenstar, arching her back. "And Brackenfoot's kits? Did they deserve to die too?" she rasped.

Brokenstar growled and hurled herself at Raggedpelt, forcing her onto her belly. Raggedpelt didn't even attempt to struggle against her thorn-sharp claws. Sandpaw saw with alarm that her eyes were glazed with sadness.

"Those kits were weak," Brokenstar hissed, bending her face toward Raggedpelt's ear. "They would have been no use to Shadowclan. If I hadn't killed them, some other warrior would have."

A wail of grief rose from a pale ginger Shadowclan queen with dark ginger legs. Brokenstar ignored her. "I should have killed *you* when I had the chance." she spat at Raggedpelt. "It seems I must have some of my father's softness. I was a fool to let you leave Shadowclan alive!" She lunged, teeth bared, ready to sink them into her neck.

Sandpaw was quicker. He jumped onto Brokenstar's back before she could clamp her jaws shut. Sandpaw dug his claws into the matted tabby fur and pulled her off the exhausted queen, flinging her to the edge of the clearing.

Brokenstar twisted around in midair to land on her feet and looked into Sandpaw's eyes, spitting viciously. "Don't waste your time, apprentice! I've shared dreams with Starclan. You will have to kill me nine times over before I join them. Do you really think you're strong enough for that?" Her eyes glowed with confidence and defiance.

Sandpaw stared back at him. His belly tightened. Brokenstar was a Clan leader! How on earth could he expect to defeat her? But the watching Shadowclan cats had begun to pad slowly toward their defeated leader, snarling and hissing with hatred. They were battered and half-starved, but Brokenstar was outnumbered, and she seemed to realize this with a nervous flick of her tail. She crouched and backed away through the bushes. Her eyes glittered menacingly from the shadows, her gaze finding Sandpaw through the crowd.

"This isn't over, apprentice," she hissed before she turned and vanished into the forest after her broken warriors.

Sandpaw looked to Brindleface. "Should we go after them?" he meowed.

The warrior shook his head. "I think they got the message that they are not welcome here."

Nightpelt, the Shadowclan warrior, nodded in agreement. "Leave them. If they dare to show their faces here again, Shadowclan will be strong enough by then to tackle them alone."

The rest of Shadowclan was huddled together in the ruins of their camp, as if numbed by the realization that their leader had gone. *It will take time to rebuild this Clan,* Sandpaw thought.

"The kits!"

Sandpaw heard Silverpaw's meow from a far corner of the clearing. He rushed over to his friend. Mousefur and Brindleface bounding at his heels. As they approached, they could hear the pitiful mewling of kits coming from beneath a pile of leaves and twigs. Quickly Silverpaw and Mousefur dug down through the foliage until they had uncovered the missing Thunderclan kits at the bottom of a small pit.

"Are they okay?" demanded Brindleface, his tail twitching with anxiety.

"They're fine," replied Silverpaw. "Most have only a few scratches. But that little tortoiseshell and white kit has a pretty nasty wound on his ear. Can you take a look, Raggedpelt?"

The old she-cat was licking her own wounds, but at Silverpaw's call she raced to the side of the pit, where Silverpaw had carefully deposited the tortoiseshell and white kit.

Sandpaw helped Silverpaw to lift out the rest of the kits. The last one was gray, like the embers of an old fire. He mewled and squirmed as Sandpaw placed him on the ground. Mousefur gathered all the kits to him and comforted them with licks and caresses.

Raggedpelt looked closely at the torn ear. "We need to stop this bleeding," she meowed.

Runningnose stepped out of the shadows. Her forepaw was coated in a layer of cobwebs, which she silently passed to Raggedpelt. She nodded her thanks and began to treat the kit's wound.

Nightpelt approached the group of Thunderclan cats. "You helped Shadowclan rid itself of a brutal and dangerous leader, and we are grateful. But it is time you left our camp and returned to your own. I promise your hunting grounds will be free of Shadowclan warriors as long as we can find enough food in our own territory."

Brindleface nodded. "Hunt in peace for one moon, Nightpelt. Thunderclan knows you need time to rebuild your Clan." He turned to Raggedpelt. "And you, Raggedpelt?" he asked. "Do you wish to return with us, or stay here with your old comrades?"

Raggedpelt looked up at him. "I will make the journey back with you." She glanced at a deep gash on Brindleface's hind leg. "You will need a medicine cat, for yourself as well as your kits."

"Thank you," purred Brindleface. He signaled to the Thunderclan cats with a sweep of his tail and led them out of the clearing. Mousefur and Willowpelt helped the kits, who stumbled along, exhausted and bewildered. Raggedpelt walked close to the wounded tortoiseshell and white kit, lifting him by the scruff of his neck every time he slipped. Sandpaw and Silverpaw followed them through the brambles, past the camp scent line and out into the forest.

The moon was still rising in the quiet sky as the Thunderclan party began the long trudge home, while around them showers of brown leaves fluttered to the forest floor.

Chapter 25

Buoyed up with relief at being home again, Sandpaw and Silverpaw sprinted ahead of the patrol into the Thunderclan camp. Lionheart was lying in the middle of the clearing, her head resting sadly on her paws. As the two apprentices bounded in she lifted her nose and sniffed the air. "My kits!" she cried. She leaped up and raced past Sandpaw and Silverpaw to meet the rest of the party as they emerged from the tunnel.

The kits rushed over to Lionheart and nuzzled into her side. She curled her soft body around them and licked them each in turn, purring loudly.

Raggedpelt hung back at the camp entrance and looked on silently.

Oakstar strode up to the returning patrol. She glanced fondly at Lionheart and her kits and then turned her eyes to Brindleface. "Are they all right?" she asked.

"They're fine," meowed Brindleface.

"Well done, Brindleface. Thunderclan honors you."

Brindleface bent his head to accept her praise, and added, "But it was thanks to this apprentice that we found them."

Sandpaw lifted his head and tail proudly, about to speak, but Goldenflower's accusing snarl sounded from across the clearing.

"Why did you bring back the traitor?" The pale warrior stalked up to the patrol and stood beside his leader.

"She is no traitor," Sandpaw insisted. He looked around the camp. The rest of the cats had quickly gathered in the clearing to see the kits and congratulate the hunting party. Some of them had spotted Raggedpelt and were eyeing her with looks of pure hatred.

"She killed Spottedleaf," spat Longtail.

"Look between Spottedleaf's claws," Silverpaw suggested. "You will find the cream and brown fur of Rowanberry, not Raggedpelt's dark brown tabby fur!"

Oakstar nodded at Mousefur, who darted away from the crowd, toward the spot where Spottedleaf's body lay, waiting for its dawn burial. The Clan waited in tense silence till he returned.

"Silverpaw is right," Mousefur panted, rushing back to the clearing. "Spottedleaf was not attacked by a dark brown tabby cat."

A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd.

"But that doesn't mean she didn't help to take the kits!" hissed Goldenflower.

"Without Raggedpelt we never would have recovered the kits!" Sandpaw spat, his exhaustion making him impatient. "She knew that a Shadowclan warrior had taken them. She was hunting for them when I found her. She risked her life returning to the Shadowclan camp. It was Raggedpelt who thought up the battle plan that got us into the Shadowclan camp and gave us a chance to defeat Brokenstar!"

The cats listened to Sandpaw's words, astonished.

"He's right," Brindleface meowed. "Raggedpelt is a friend."

"I'm glad to hear it," murmured Oakstar, catching Sandpaw's eye.

Lionheart's anxious meow sounded from the crowd. "Is Brokenstar dead?" she asked.

"No, she escaped," Brindleface told her. "But she will never lead Shadowclan again."

Lionheart sighed in relief and returned to nuzzling her kits.

Brindleface looked at Oakstar. "I promised Shadowclan we would leave them in peace until next full moon," he explained. "Brokenstar's leadership has left their Clan in chaos."

Oakstar nodded. "That was a wise and generous offer," she meowed approvingly. The Thunderclan leader walked past Brindleface and the rest of the patrol and approached Raggedpelt. Raggedpelt lowered her eyes as Oakstar touched the dark brown tabby cat's rough coat with her nose.

"Raggedpelt, I wish you to replace Spottedleaf as medicine cat to Thunderclan," Oakstar meowed. "I'm sure you'll find all her supplies as she left them."

The other cats began to murmur to each other, tails flicking with excitement. Raggedpelt looked around at them anxiously and said nothing.

Lionheart glanced at the other queens before she met Raggedpelt's gaze and slowly nodded her approval.

Raggedpelt bent her head respectfully to the golden tabby cat before addressing her new leader. "Thank you, Oakstar. Shadowclan is not the Clan I once knew. Thunderclan is my Clan now."

Sandpaw felt a surge of satisfaction that the old she-cat he had come to love would be his Clan's medicine cat from now on. Then his tail dropped as he realized that he would never again find Spottedleaf in his clearing, the sunlight gleaming on his soft fur, his amber eyes shining in welcome.

"Where's Patchpaw?" meowed Oakstar suddenly, jolting Sandpaw out of his bittersweet remembrances.

"Yes," Goldenflower chimed in, "where is my apprentice? Strange that she should disappear along with Brokenstar." He looked meaningfully around the Clan.

"If you think she might have been helping Brokenstar," Sandpaw meowed boldly, "then you are wrong!"

Goldenflower stiffened, a menacing gleam in his yellow eyes.

"Patchpaw is dead," Sandpaw went on, dropping his head as if weighed down with grief. "We found her body in Shadowclan territory. From the scents around her, she must have been slain by a

Shadowclan patrol." He looked at Oakstar. "I will tell you everything later," he promised.

Raggedpelt shot Sandpaw a questioning look. Sandpaw returned her gaze with a silent plea for her to hold her tongue. She twitched her ears briefly in understanding and looked away.

"I never said that Patchpaw was a traitor," hissed Goldenflower. He paused and allowed an expression of sorrow to cloud his eyes before he turned to address the rest of the Clan. "Patchpaw might have made a fine warrior. Her death has come too soon, and her loss will be felt by many of us for a long time."

Empty words! Thought Sandpaw bitterly. What would Goldenflower say if he knew that Patchpaw was safe, far beyond the forest, catching rats with Raven?

Oakstar broke the silence. "We will miss Patchpaw, but we shall mourn her tomorrow. First there is another ritual that must be performed—one, I know, that Patchpaw would have taken pleasure in." She turned to Sandpaw and Silverpaw. "You have shown great courage tonight. Did they fight well, Brindleface?" she asked.

"Like warriors," Brindleface replied solemnly.

Oakstar met his green-eyed gaze and gave a slight nod. Then she lifted her chin and fixed her eyes on Silverpelt's swath of stars. Her voice rang out, clear and measured in the hushed woods. "I, Oakstar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." She looked down at Sandpaw and Silverpaw, narrowing her eyes. "Sandpaw, Silverpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

Sandpaw felt something stir within him, a fire that burned in his belly and rang in his ears. He suddenly felt that everything he had done for the Clan so far—all the prey he had stalked, all the enemy warriors he had fought—had been for the sake of this single moment. "I do," he replied steadily.

"I do," echoed Silverpaw, his fur bristling with excitement.

"Then by the powers of Starclan I give you your warrior names: Silverpaw, from this moment you will be known as Silverstream. Starclan honors your bravery and your strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Thunderclan." Oakstar stepped forward and rested her muzzle on top of Silverstream's bowed head. He bent lower to give her shoulder a respectful lick, then straightened up and walked over to join the other warriors.

Oakstar stood and studied Sandpaw for a long moment before speaking. "Sandpaw, from this moment you will be known as Sandstorm. Starclan honors your bravery and your strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Thunderclan." She touched her muzzle to his head and murmured, "Sandstorm, I am proud to have you as my warrior. Serve your Clan well, young one."

Sandstorm's muscles were trembling so much that he could hardly stop to lick Oakstar's shoulder. He purred hoarsely to show his thanks, then slipped away to stand beside Silverstream.

Meows of tribute sounded from the crowd, and the voices of the Clan rose in the still night air to chant the new warrior names. "Sandstorm! Silverstream! Sandstorm! Silverstream!"

Sandstorm looked around the Clan, seeing faces that had grown so familiar over the last few moons. He listened to them as they called his new name and felt overwhelmed by the kindness and respect he saw shining in their eyes.

"It is almost moonhigh," meowed Oakstar. "In the tradition of our ancestors, Sandstorm and Silverstream must sit in silent vigil until dawn, and guard the camp alone while we sleep."

Sandstorm and Silverstream nodded solemnly.

As the rest of the Clan began to melt away back to their dens, Goldenflower pushed past Sandstorm. The Thunderclan deputy showed as he passed and hissed quietly into his ear, "Don't think you can outwit me, kittypet. Be careful what you tell Oakstar."

A cold shiver ran down Sandstorm's spine. Oakstar had to know about Goldenflower's treachery!

As Goldenflower headed back to the warriors' den, Sandstorm left Silverstream sitting alone in the clearing and bounded after Oakstar. He caught up with her outside her den. "Oakstar, I know I'm breaking the vow of silence, but I must speak with you before I begin my vigil."

Oakstar looked at Sandstorm and shook her head. "This is an important ritual, Sandstorm. You can speak to me int he morning."

Sandstorm dipped his head in acceptance. Goldenflower was not a problem that could be solved overnight anyway. He returned to Silverstream's side in the middle of the clearing. The two friends exchanged glances, but said nothing.

Sandstorm looked at the moon above his head. His pale ginger coat glowed silver in the cold light. Around him, the bushes and trees were draped in mist that brushed damply against his fur. Sandstorm closed his eyes and recalled the dreams of his kittenhood. The cool forest scents in his nostrils were real now, and the life of a warrior stretched ahead of him. He felt unrestrained joy flood up from his paws and surge through his body. Then he opened his eyes with a jolt. Another pair of eyes was shining back at him from the warriors' den.

Goldenflower!

Sandstorm stared back without blinking. He was a warrior now. He had made an enemy of the Clan's deputy, but Goldenflower had made an enemy of him. Sandstorm was not the same naive young cat who had joined the Clan all those moons ago. He was bigger, stronger, faster, and wiser. If he was destined to oppose Goldenflower, then so be it. Sandstorm was ready for the challenge.

The End/Update

Hi guys it's the author here!

I finally finished the first Warriors AU book! I have plans to do this for every book. These will include the main series, super editions, and novellas. So this is 1/82 books I have planned.

The Allegiance and Prologue for Fire and Ice will be uploaded tomorrow. I'm going to try and update the stories every day. I've been so busy with college and work that I forgot this story existed for awhile.

I'm hoping to finish Fire and Ice by July 19th! If I don't upload one day it's because I ended up being very busy.

Thank you all for reading this story! I hope you enjoyed my little AU and will continue to read the books in the future!